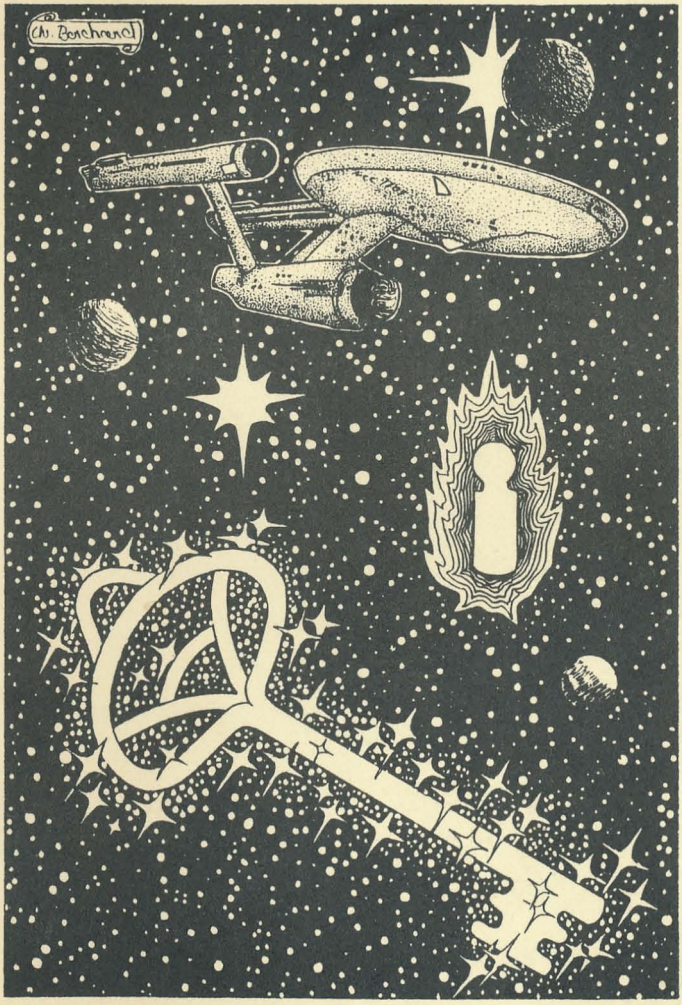
SCOTPRESS

THE CRACK IN THE MIRROR

BY SHEILA CLARK



A STAR TREK FANZINE

THE CRACK IN THE MIRROR

by

Sheila Clark

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A ScoTpress publication

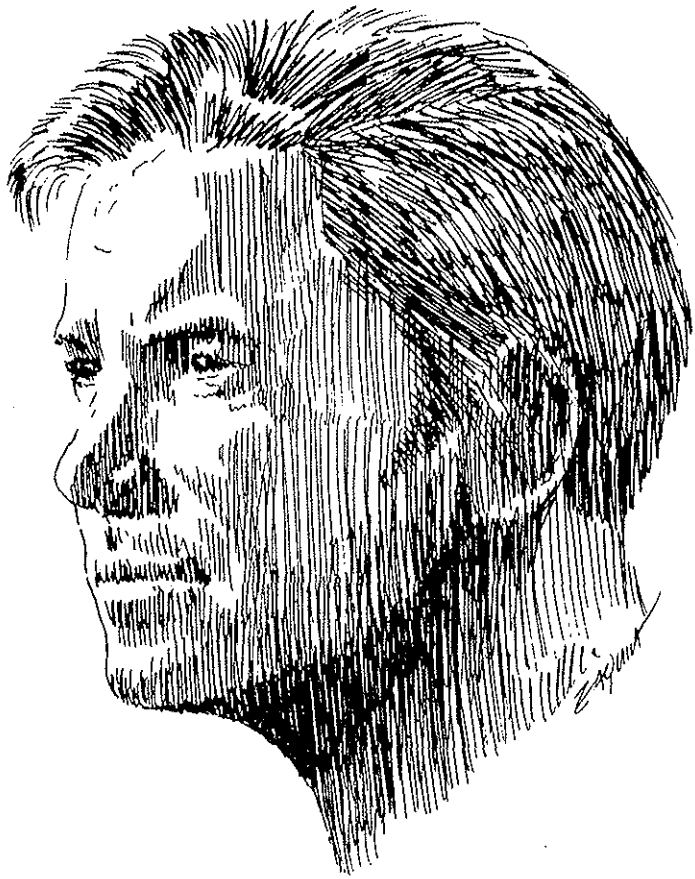
Editor - Valerie Piacentini
Typing - Sheila Clark
Proofreading - Janet Quarton, Sheila Clark & Valerie Piacentini
Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
Printing - Urban Print, 57 Perth Road, Dundee.
Distracting - Shona and Cindy

THE CRACK IN THE MIRROR, which tells of the eventual revolution in the Mirror, Mirror universe, is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

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THE CRACK IN THE MIRROR

EARTH

Old City. A conglomeration of slums where lived only the desperately poor, it was a mere shadow of the once-great city that it had been. Even its original name was no longer spoken, for it was no longer the place that name referred to.

One minute it had been a flourishing, wealthy metropolis, Capital of Earth - and therefore of the Empire; the next, it was a gigantic ruin, almost completely destroyed in one violent upheaval of the ground. The earthquake had lasted only seconds; the fire that followed had finally been quenched almost a week later by the rain of a thunderstorm.

It had long been known that the ground was unstable, too close to a tectonic fault; the survivors in the government were those who had chosen to make their homes in a dormitory town nearly a hundred miles distant, preferring a lengthy journey each time they attended a meeting to the uncertainty of living so close to a major fault. That hundred miles was enough to save it from more than a mild shake and a few broken plates, so the Emperor - whose main residence, fortunately for himself, was half a world away - decided, on the recommendation of his chief advisers, not to rebuild on the original site, as had been done at least once before, but rather to move everything to the safer site where an originally small town was already growing large.

With the government had gone those who had survived of its army of workers, the shopkeepers who depended on the wealth of those workers for their livelihood... and left behind were those unfortunates whose jobs had been permanently lost, who were too old to be employed, who were unwilling to leave the area where they had always lived, who still insisted, even as New City was expanded, that the government couldn't do this, couldn't move and leave them destitute.

But the government could, and the government did, and those who were unwanted or who were unwilling or unable to move were abandoned to the ruins of Old City.

Life was not impossible there; the earthquake had been fickle in its destructiveness, and in some areas, particularly the newer outskirts, a few buildings had survived, some of them in quite a reasonable state of repair - until neglect took its toll. A handful of entrepreneurs provided work of a kind - low-paid, monotonous, near-slave labour that churned out the sort of hand-made goods that gave the employers a high income for a low output. The government even set up a tax and law-control office in a reasonably well-preserved building, and also a series of shops where poor quality meat and bread could be bought - stale bread and fatty meat that could not be sold in New City, even to the 'poor' - for even there it did not take long for a poor class to emerge. The word 'poor' is however comparative; compared to the poor of Old City they were quite affluent.

Nobody did anything to stop the wretched beggars who remained from building themselves hovels among the ruins of once-proud skyscrapers, using whatever materials they could salvage. Old City and everything in it had been abandoned by the government. It did not care what the inhabitants did with the remains. The government's only interest in Old City lay in collecting as much money as possible from the people there in the form of taxes and the sale of barely edible 'food'.

Life expectancy tended to be short - infant mortality was high, and few adults reached their fiftieth birthday. The handful who did were ones whose metabolism needed very little food, for the almost total lack of fresh food, the poor quality of government-supplied rations, and the low income kept everyone close to starvation.

Deficiency diseases were common.

During the first few years after the earthquake some of those who stayed moved out, finally - reluctantly - accepting that their city was finished and would not recover; they made their way, if not to New City, to some of the smaller towns nearby that had escaped the worst of the havoc wrought by the earthquake. But as the years went by those who were left adapted, developing their own way of life. It was a life of hardship, certainly; a usually short life of almost permanent hunger; but it was a life of relative peace in the vicious Empire, for most of the men of Old City were, because of those very hardships, medically unfit for conscription into the Empire's armies.

The people of Old City filled in no census forms, no employment forms, for where there were no schools there was no literacy and it was not worth the effort of getting government officers to interview them and fill in the forms for them; it was the employers who gave the government a list of the names of those who worked for them. They paid their taxes at the tax office - reluctantly, but they paid them, for the alternative was a raid by government forces, who would loot, rape, kill, and generally render the level of life even more unbearable than it already was. They had found that out the hard way. Otherwise they barely existed to the Empire, were of no more importance than the Tellarites, those confirmed agoraphobes whose planet was being systematically stripped of minerals. The Tellarites themselves, hauled willy-nilly into an Empire they did not, could not, understand, had no defence against this legalised theft, for they degenerated into gibbering idiots at the first sight of the stars of open space. Their planet was perpetually shrouded in a thick layer of cloud; their language did not even have a word for 'sun'.

He was known simply as The Vulcan. *If he had a name, nobody knew it.*

He had lived in the slums of Old City for so long that even Grandfather Robbins, who was older than anyone else in Old City, claimed that he could not remember a time when he was not. Grandfather Robbins could not, he said, even remember The Vulcan as being young; The Vulcan had been (he said) an adult for all of Grandfather Robbins' almost unprecedented sixty years of memory. Of course, it was said that Vulcans lived for a long, long time, that a Vulcan could outlive eight generations of Humans - even the Humans who lived in New City, whose grandfathers, born in the same year as Grandfather Robbins, could expect to outlive him by at least twenty years.

Neither did anyone know where The Vulcan lived; he would suddenly appear on the edge of a crowd, watching silently, and after a while he would vanish again on whisper-soft feet, seemingly able to pick the exact moment when nobody was watching to make his departure.

He was never seen to buy meat; instead, he patronised the few stalls that sold fruit and vegetables, expensive though they were, buying only enough for one day at a time. It did seem, however, that he left Old City occasionally, for sometimes several days, even weeks, would pass when nobody at all saw him. Once it was even nearly a year, and the people thought he had gone - but one day he reappeared, looking as if he had never been away, slipping easily back into the position he had always held.

He bothered no-one, giving no trouble; neither did he ask for any assistance. He was, it seemed, perfectly self-sufficient. Nor did he ever offer assistance, although he was perfectly willing to lend his 'neighbours' his strength if he was asked for aid - if that aid was truly needed. It seemed that he could tell if someone was trying to take advantage of him. Yet even then he never became angry, merely raising an eyebrow and saying, "You have all the assistance you require," before turning away. Money he never gave.

Even rumour, that most lying of jades, was silent when The Vulcan was mentioned.

Nobody knew why a Vulcan, a member of one of the Empire's most clannish races, a race that always protected its own, should be living in obscurity here in the slums of the old city that was once the centre of government of Earth, and supposition, usually rife when fact was unknown, became dumb when he was named.

He was simply there.

And he was very, very lonely.

Thomas was the younger of the two surviving sons of one of the senior government officials unfortunate enough to be assigned to the tax office of Old City.

As a government employee, the boy's father was - by the standards of Earth - quite rich, but his life was totally ruled by the demands of his work. He had no say either in where he was assigned, or for how long; he went where he was sent unprotesting, for he knew that protest would quickly lose him his employment and the prestige that went with it. Civil servants were the elite of Earth's workforce, no matter where they worked, and there were many hopefuls, sons of his fellow workers who did not want to lose status, anxious to fill any gaps in those august ranks.

When he was assigned to Old City, his wife was eight months pregnant. It had been a difficult pregnancy, and he knew that the move would probably mean her death, but even so he took her with him, knowing that the government would look askance at any attempt on his part to leave her in New City, no matter what his reason, no matter how short the time before he sent for her. He still felt a mild affection for her, but she was easier to replace than his job would be.

She had gone into labour prematurely, almost immediately on their arrival in the new government dormitory town that had been built near Old City, and - as he had expected - she died, but the child lived. It had been easy enough to obtain a wet nurse for the child, and even easier to persuade the woman to become his mistress - though not for one moment did he consider marrying a woman from Old City. She was philosophic about it, considering her position an improvement on her previous condition, and quietly, discreetly, but tenaciously, she set about acquiring as much money as she could from him, careful not to be too greedy - she was not a fool - and saving the bulk of it against the day that would undoubtedly come when he either tired of her or was moved away.

She had the sense to treat her paramour's children, especially the baby who was her main responsibility, as well as if they were her own, and was gratified that both her own infant and her year old daughter were accepted by them. Indeed, her own children were more readily accepted by the older children than she was, though they understood why she had to be there. Perhaps fortunately, they were all too young to understand that she shared their father's bed as well as providing sustenance for their baby brother.

The baby, somewhat to his father's surprise, thrived.

A fever epidemic when the infant was some eighteen months old carried off half of the children throughout the world, and many of the adults too. Even in New City, where lived the favoured few and where medical attention could be obtained - albeit at a price - a third of the children were struck down, most of them to die. Some places were more badly affected than others - three out of every four of the undernourished children of

Old City died. The fever, carried to the rural dormitory village where they lived by the adults who worked in Old City, killed Thomas's foster sister as well as his sibling sister and the younger of his two brothers, and left the remaining brother ailing for some time; neither the motherless infant nor his foster brother even sickened.

Thomas grew into an adventurous youngster who never ailed and who seemed destined to bounce back unharmed from anything life cared to throw at him; and his foster brother followed him, unprotesting.

His father cared little enough for his children; his foster mother, although she never neglected either boy, gave them little overt affection, deliberately holding herself slightly aloof so that they would not become too attached to her, for she was only too well aware that one day - and as the younger boy grew older, she could see it coming closer and closer - her usefulness would end and she would be sent away. She cared enough for the children to wish to spare them the unhappiness that they would know if they lost a loved adult. She tried to discourage the friendship that existed between her younger charge and her own son, but without success. Thomas found his foster brother a more satisfactory playmate than his own brother.

When Thomas was eight his father was given a promotion that meant his permanent assignment to the tax office of Old City - unless he should be lucky enough to be promoted again. It also meant that instead of living decently in the government village ten miles from Old City, he - and his family - had to live in the apartments attached to the tax office. He took advantage of the move to dismiss his mistress, who had begun to bore him, thankful that she accepted her dismissal quietly and without protest; but when he offered to give her son a home - he saw in the youngster a useful servant for his own children - she accepted gratefully. Now she only had herself to consider.

On the day they moved to the new house their father took his sons - and their erstwhile playmate, who was now to be their servant - to the window and stood gazing over the broken rooftops for a long time. At last he turned to the boys. He felt no great love for them - or anyone - but he did feel a certain sense of responsibility for them.

"You must never go into the city," he told them firmly. "Never."

The older brother looked at the ruins and shuddered. "I wish we were back in the country," he said, knowing even as he spoke that if he wanted to return to the country he must find work that would take him there.

Thomas looked out of the window with a curiosity that neither his father nor his brother would ever know, and said nothing. His foster brother watched him, half guessing at his unstated interest, and ready, as always, to follow where Thomas led.

Their father hired a tutor for them, the best he could afford - and he could afford a good one now. On consideration, he even agreed that the servant boy should join the classes; it could be useful to have a literate servant to act as secretary. Jonathan was competent at his lessons, and learned far more than he let anyone suspect; he was quick to guess that his 'guardian' would be angry if the son of a commoner from Old City proved to be as good at his work as the sons of a government worker.

George, whose school career in the government suburb had been uninspired, soon showed an aptitude for the biological sciences, a subject that had been virtually neglected at the school. His father was pleased, for the subject was one that opened up a wide range of job opportunities; still-overpopulated Earth was desperate for improved food crops; and there was also a need for crops suited to Terran metabolism that would grow on colony planets. His older son would certainly be able to find a job in the country where he was so anxious to live.

Thomas showed no positive aptitude, and at first his father was displeased; but when the tutor pointed out that his younger pupil was proving quick to learn everything, he realised that this would open up a very wide range of career possibilities. He smiled in satisfaction at that. His younger son was bound to be a success in life.

It was a gratifying thought.

The tutor was correct; Thomas was indeed interested in everything, and it was not long before his overwhelming curiosity made him begin to wonder once more about the ruined city - that forbidden area where his father said he must never go.

From wondering, it was a short step to considering disobeying his father's orders.

He had no reason to think that his father actually cared what happened to him. He could not have put it into words, but young though he was he suspected that the order had been given from a combination of pride - the son of a government official was above mixing with the riff-raff of Old City - and just possibly a slight touch of guilt that he did not care.

Thomas dismissed the fleeting thought that it might indeed be dangerous. After all, the people of Old City lived, didn't they? They didn't spend their time attacking each other, did they? He was not old enough to appreciate that while they might not attack each other they would have little compunction about attacking a stranger and none at all if that stranger was one of the advantaged class.

He knew better than to ask his brother to accompany him; George was not quite lacking in courage, but the fever he had suffered had left him slightly delicate. As a result he was nervous of disposition and easily upset. Besides, his nature was to be obedient to a stronger will. Thomas had no doubt that his was the stronger will, but George would obey his father before he would obey his younger brother. And even Thomas, though he was not given to fearing easily, thought twice before openly opposing his father, whatever he might think of doing in secret. He was also unwilling to involve his foster brother, who would certainly be happy to join him, but who could so easily be sent away. All it needed was his father to decide that the son of a woman from Old City was a bad influence, even though Jonathan's life in the ruins of Old City could be measured in hours rather than days.

But his curiosity about Old City, once aroused, refused to go away. He must behave circumspectly, but the first chance he got, he promised himself, he would go into the city.

His opportunity came when his father was called away for a few days to a meeting in New City. The man's own expenses were reclaimable, but he could not claim for his family, and in any case it was hardly worth the upheaval to move his entire household for a week; so he left

the boys in their tutor's care.

Well aware of the responsibility resting on his shoulders, and disinclined to risk losing his well-paid and - even here - prestigious position, the tutor kept an eye firmly on both boys, though never for one moment did he dream that his younger charge had an adventurous spirit that fretted at the restraint imposed on it by over-cautious adults and longed for release.

Two days later the tutor fell ill. He might have presumed to call in the doctor from the government village for the sake of his charges - their father did not neglect their physical wellbeing, no matter how careless he was of their emotional health - but he knew well enough what ailed him; a recurrance of malaria, the result of a mosquito bite he had suffered several years previously when his then employer lived in tropical Africa. He sent for the boys, assigned them work sufficient to keep them occupied for three or four days, and returned to his bed where he shivered and sweated and wished he could die.

All three boys took their books to their rooms, but while George and Jonathan set to work immediately and conscientiously, Thomas dumped his books on his bed and slipped back out of his room, down the stairs, and out of the house.

He knew he must be careful; it would never do to get lost. But if he was careful to memorise the route he took, he would surely find it easy to make his way back.

He picked his way carefully down the filthy, garbage-littered street that backed onto the tax office, wrinkling his nose at the stench which was normally filtered out of his home by the air conditioning, and looking about him curiously.

He had not gone far before he realised how out of place he looked. The people he passed wore dirty, sometimes patched and often torn clothes; his clothes were clean - what was more, they were whole, unpatched and without holes. He began to feel slightly self-conscious, but it was not until he noticed a boy, just a little smaller than himself though far, far thinner, watching him enviously that he began to worry, for he realised then what a prize the clothes that he took so much for granted would be. He was sure that he could hold his own against one assailant, but if a group of these ragged slum boys chose to join forces and attack him, he would stand little chance.

Reminding himself that foolhardiness was not courage, Thomas turned to return home, and discovered that he was being followed by several boys of about his own size. He suspected that it was a group of individuals rather than a gang, but he realised that they might very well form a temporary alliance in order to defeat him, and then probably fight amongst themselves for possession of his clothes, leaving him to struggle home as best he could.

He glared at them, trying to cow them by sheer willpower, but, strong-willed though he was, he was not yet old enough for a mere glare to win the day, though he noticed two of them backing off.

Not enough, *he thought, resigning himself to the beating he was sure he would receive - and the thrashing that would surely follow when he did return home. His tutor might not tell his father, for he would fear to be dismissed for failing in his duty towards his charge, but he would certainly take punitive action himself.*

And then the group scattered.

The boy turned, and found himself staring at a Vulcan. He gaped, manners forgotten in the unlikely sight of a Vulcan in Old City.

Unlike everyone else he had seen, The

Vulcan was clean, but his clothes were old, faded and patched, and the boy wondered for a moment if The Vulcan, like himself, had come here out of curiosity, but had come better prepared for the conditions.

"You should not be here, child," The Vulcan said quietly. His voice was unusual; deep and semi-educated, with overtones of the city patois, the voice of someone who belonged to Old City and yet - somehow - should not.

"I... I know that now," Thomas said, conceding the point. "My father always told me to stay out of the city - and I wondered why. He's away just now, so I thought I would... explore."

"You are more likely to die," The Vulcan told him frankly. "If you want to explore Old City, find yourself old, worn clothes, clothes that are not worth the stealing. Dirty your face and your hair, so that nobody looks twice at you, to see that you might be worth a ransom."

"You aren't dirty," the boy protested.

"Neither am I a helpless child who is hopelessly out of his depth, who has never had to fight in order to survive. This is my home; I have lived here longer than I care to remember."

The boy was not old enough or experienced enough to recognise subtleties of expression, but he sensed an underlying grief in the deep voice. And there was something in the words that he could not understand.

"But you're a Vulcan - and the Vulcans live in the stars."

An expression that was not quite a rueful smile passed briefly over The Vulcan's face and was gone, leaving only a trace of sadness in the dark eyes.

"Not all of us, child. Not all of us."

He seemed to shake off depression and his back gave the impression of stiffening. "Come now. I will see you safely back to your home. I will not say do not come again. *You are old enough to make your own decisions; you have been warned, and you have seen one of the dangers. I will say only this - if you choose to come into the city again, heed my words to you."*

"Will I see you if I come again?" Suddenly it seemed important to the boy that he should see The Vulcan again.

The Vulcan smiled, openly this time. "Do you truly wish to see me again?"

"Yes."

"Then I will watch for you."

Thomas had not been missed - indeed, he had been away barely an hour. As he settled in his room to catch up on his studying his mind was only half on his books. The other half was considering his wardrobe. Were any of his clothes old enough, shabby enough, ill-fitting enough that he could use them as disguise to go back into the city? Hardly. His father was jealous of his position in the government service, and his family was kept well dressed as a sign of his status - regardless of the fact that there was nobody here to impress. Here in Old City nobody outside the family saw either boy. It had been different in the government village, and Thomas sighed wearily.

It was so dreary, living here!

And then he remembered. He did have a shirt and trousers that had been torn, not badly, but badly enough for his father to tell him to throw them out. He had kept them, for he had liked them, and they were tucked carefully away in the back of his wardrobe where nobody - he hoped - would find them. If he ripped

them just a little more...

From then on Thomas made occasional sorties into the city. More than once he found himself involved in a fight, and he quickly learned how to fight dirty, for he dared not go home bruised. He explored with interest and open eyes, seeing much that was normally hidden from the children of the elite.

More satisfactory than his solitary visits were the times when he saw The Vulcan, who did indeed watch for him, and they became as friendly as two so dissimilar people could be. The Vulcan taught him a great deal about life - a great deal that Thomas realised he would never have learned if he had remained safely at home, and that his brother would never learn. Sometimes he thought about bringing Jonathan, but he decided against it. He wanted to keep The Vulcan to himself.

The boy quickly realised that he was the only person who had learned where The Vulcan lived. His happiest hours were the ones that he spent in The Vulcan's home, two rooms that had survived undamaged in an otherwise collapsed building, entered through a crawlway where fallen walls had been propped up. From the outside the place looked totally derelict, and the boy wondered how The Vulcan had ever found the undamaged rooms. But he decided that it might be better not to ask.

And then one day everything changed. His father returned from work beaming.

Promotion.

No, they would not be returning to the government village.

They were going to New City!

Even in the rush to pack, Thomas managed to slip out for half an hour to see The Vulcan and tell his friend that he was leaving. Then, almost before he knew it, they were on their way to New City.

If anything, Thomas liked New City even less than Old City. Old City, derelict though it was, had an honesty that New City lacked. New City was soulless, a hotbed of scandal and corruption, masked and disguised by the routine of government life and the apparent respectability of everyone who lived there. But underneath the respectability Thomas sensed the jungle, all the more deadly for being hidden.

Three months after Thomas and his family left the office in Old City another earthquake, long predicted but undatable, hit the patchily repaired ruins of the once-proud Old City. Fire, the major hazard that follows immediately after a serious quake, spread quickly, and many of those who did not die in the actual collapse of the buildings were suffocated in the choking smoke or were burned where they lay trapped in the ruins of their houses.

Of the thousands of people who had lived in Old City, a few hundreds survived. Most of them lived at the southern edge of the town.

Thomas heard about the earthquake at school. (Their tutor had been retained to teach George, but his father had decided that Thomas would benefit from the more varied curriculum at school. Jonathan's school days were officially over; but Thomas, to clarify things in his own mind, went over his homework with his foster-brother, and from that

Jonathan's education continued with only Thomas knowing it.) At home, his enquiries gained a little more information, but left the one question he dared not ask unanswered.

He did learn that the Tax Office had been badly damaged, although nobody there had died or was even seriously hurt. However, it would not reopen. The survivors - like it or not - would be resettled. The burned-out ruins would be left to Nature.

There was no mention of a Vulcan.

Sadly, Thomas was forced to the realisation that his friend must be dead. He could only hope that the Vulcan had died instantly in the quake, rather than suffer an agonising death in the fire.

In front of his family he managed to hide his grief; but that night, in bed, he sobbed helplessly in the knowledge that his Vulcan friend was dead.

By morning he had control of himself again - but his life had been changed completely. Never again, he swore, would he allow himself to become truly fond of anyone.

The only exception to this was his foster brother Jonathan, of whom he was already fond. In the cut-throat world of the Empire he would need one person to trust, and the bond of affection that already existed between them would ensure Jonathan's loyalty. For his brother, Thomas felt little affection. George was too delicate, too quiet, too anxious to please to be a good companion on the path to success - for only success was worth anything in the Empire. For his father he felt nothing.

As for the new acquaintances that he would make - he was determined that they would be nothing but acquaintances. He would never again risk the heartbreak of losing a dearly-loved friend.

THE ENTERPRISE

Farrell, his chief operative, moved quickly to his place at his master's right shoulder as Commander James Kirk stepped off the transporter platform to face the senior officers of his new ship. Insecurity, his frequent companion, stood at his left shoulder as he faced them, for all had been on this ship for some time; he was the incomer, the stranger here, and he did not know - could not know - how they would react to him.

With the ease of long practice he kept his nervousness hidden. It was no joke being Starfleet's Golden Boy; the youngest First Officer in the Fleet, he was well aware of how easy it could be to become the youngest Captain and then the youngest failed Captain, for a good First Officer - and he knew he was good - does not always make a good Commanding Officer; and in addition a First Officer's personal guard, no matter how devoted, might not be ruthless enough to protect the Captain in those first days following a take-over - traditionally the most likely time for a new Captain to be overthrown in his turn.

What if he should fail? Fail to win the loyalty of enough of this seasoned crew to enable him to stand a reasonable chance of survival. So much depended on the way his predecessor had behaved. Fortunately their previous First Officer's death had been a hazard of the Service. There was nobody to seek revenge for it.

The one other officer who wore a Commander's insignia took a single step forward.

"Spock, sir. Science Officer."

"Mr. Spock."

A Vulcan? Here, on a predominately Human-manned ship? He had thought all Vulcans in Starfleet were on board the Intrepid. Well, he had never suffered from the almost universal Terran awe of Vulcans. Indeed, he rather liked them and fully appreciated their abilities.

The Vulcan half turned to indicate the other crew members.

"Lt. Commander Scott, Chief Engineer. Lt. Sulu, Helm and Security Chief. Lt. Uhura, Communications; Lt. Mitchell, Navigation; Dr. Piper, Medical. Captain Pike sends his apologies. He is... unavoidably detained."

You're not a good liar, Mr. Spock, Kirk thought. *How can he be busy with all the senior officers here?*

He allowed nothing of his scepticism to show on his face. "Gentlemen. Miss Uhura." He assessed them rapidly, as any senior officer with aspirations to promotion soon learned to do.

There was no obvious hostility directed towards him that he could see. They appeared to be willing to give him the opportunity to prove himself. He could not, however, believe that none were ambitious. Sulu, for example, wore an expression that clearly said, *Don't get in my way.*

He flashed his most charming smile at them. Uhura and Mitchell responded, it seemed half shyly; Scott and Spock both nodded slightly, acknowledging but not responding; Piper grinned widely. Only Sulu gave no obvious reaction but continued to watch him, without obvious hostility but with a degree of caution, as if he half suspected that the surface charm hid something less attractive. For someone who did hide a ruthless interior under a deceptively smooth, plausible amiability, that caution might be an open invitation to sly bullying; for Kirk, who took no pleasure in ruling through unnecessary fear, it aroused only a determination to win the man's trust, coupled with a faint curiosity as to why the man should be so wary.

Wary. A Security Chief, wary? Never! That was a contradiction in terms. Kirk made a mental note to treat Sulu with circumspection.

He began to wonder about his new Captain. He knew Pike only by reputation as a man who ran a tight ship; was it possible that he ruled only through fear? That was not a good system.

He glanced round the others again, considering.

Only Piper was openly responsive; but then he was the only one who did not answer completely to the Captain. The two more senior officers, who did, were clearly holding themselves, if not aloof, certainly to themselves. The three more junior officers were in varying degrees more cautious, and - apart from the Security Chief - that was understandable. A senior officer could treat his underlings with whatever severity he chose, and there was nothing they could do about it but submit. Careful juniors trod warily in the presence of the Captain or the First Officer.

Which brought him back to Pike. Many Captains were almost paranoid about ambitious junior officers; an able junior with an eye to promotion had to tread a narrow, narrow path if his Captain were to notice his ability yet not feel threatened by it. It was possible that the wary Sulu had made the mistake of being too efficient...

The thoughts flashed through his mind even as he turned his attention back to the Vulcan. "Would you care to show me around the ship, Mr. Spock?"

"Certainly, sir."

Kirk tried to analyse the Vulcan's response but found himself unable to read anything more than the surface agreement, and knew that he would have to watch this man carefully. Spock had a good poker face, and clearly kept his own counsel very well indeed.

Farrell fell into step behind him as they left the transporter room; and as the door swished shut behind them, a Vulcan guard moved to Spock's shoulder. He and Farrell eyed each other suspiciously, each trying to assess the other's competence, but both willing to wait until their respective masters should decide whether or not to trust each other.

The first thing that struck Kirk as he entered the corridor was how clean everything was. He knew that the ship was in the second year of a five-year mission; at the end of the five years she would get a refit and repaint, but by this stage he would have expected the paintwork to be showing some signs of wear. There was none; the corridor looked as if it was freshly painted, and he wondered how Pike managed to keep it that way.

The second thing that he discovered was where Pike was. The tour of the ship very soon took them past the Agony Booth; Pike was standing there, watching the writhing of a young ensign with an attention that could only be called avid. He was clearly getting a sick pleasure out of every second of the girl's pain. As Spock led him past the Booth towards Pike, Kirk had time to notice that the setting was on full.

Spock paused where Pike could see him, and the Captain's eyes flickered past him to Kirk.

"Commander Kirk reporting aboard, sir," Kirk said evenly. Pike nodded, neither greeting nor dismissing, his uninterest apparently complete. It was an attitude calculated to rattle someone whose self-assurance was in any way shaky.

"Carry on, Mr. Kirk." Kirk would have expected him to sound bored - boredom would have matched his careless gesture; instead he sounded irritated, as if he was annoyed at being interrupted.

Spock glanced at the new First Officer and led him on along the corridor. Once out of earshot of the Agony Booth Kirk said quietly, "Full intensity? What has she done?"

"Refused to go to the Captain's bed." Spock's tone was noncommittal.

"Refused...?" Stunned disbelief showed through Kirk's careful control, but he knew that Spock could read his reaction as either shock at the 'crime' or shock at Pike's over-response to it. It would be interesting to see how Spock replied.

"The Captain sees her refusal as a threat to his authority." He threw a look at Kirk as if to assess his reaction to this. "She is not the first, but she has been the most stubborn."

Kirk grunted, thinking of Sulu. "Men, too?"

Spock nodded. "The Captain's tastes are most varied."

They walked on in silence for several paces. The exchange had been interesting, and Kirk was sure he had not betrayed the full extent of his disapproval; but neither was he sure of the extent of Spock's.

Alone in the cabin assigned to him, Kirk took only moments to unpack the single small case that carried his few personal possessions. First he took out a small carved cube, pressed five of the carvings in a specific order and slid one side open, then, having flicked a switch, he closed it again and left it sitting on his desk, an apparent ornament, confident that the small electronic scrambler would ensure that he was not being spied on. Then he shook out a simple civilian suit in a neutral, inconspicuous dark grey, its design carefully chosen to look smart without being over-expensive, stylish without being ultra-fashionable, and the off-white shirt to wear with the suit, and put them onto hangers in the small wardrobe; then he slipped the case with his medals and the tapes that held his personal log into his safe; and last of all he took out his most valued possession - an old, real paper book of poetry. He laid it on the small table beside his bed.

His unpacking complete, Kirk moved to sit at the desk, still empty apart from his scrambler, and considered what he had learned already.

One sure assumption - if an assumption could be said to be sure - was that Pike could not be liked. He was undoubtedly feared; he was probably hated, and hated by everyone aboard. Only Kirk himself did not yet hate him - or even dislike or fear him - but he had no doubt that it would only be a matter of time before the lack of respect he already felt deepened into something more personal.

The Agony Booth was an excellent disciplinary measure... but it was the ultimate punishment, used for behaviour that threatened the ship, not for something as petty as refusing to warm the Captain's bed.

Did Pike really want an unwilling partner?

Kirk frowned. It was possible. There were men whose mentality was so warped that they needed the fillip of resistance - even the resistance of unwilling agreement - before they could achieve sexual release.

Such a man had no place on a Starship.

The new First Officer half smiled. When opportunity arose... It was unlikely that Pike's personal guard would even try to stop a determined assassin - if that assassin showed them that he could offer more than the abject fear that Pike clearly demanded.

The buzzer trilled for attention and he sat up alertly. No matter that he clearly had no work to do - yet.

"Come."

It was Farrell, of course, and Kirk allowed himself to relax again.

"Hello, Jon - everything O.K.?"

"This isn't a happy ship, Jim." Farrell spoke with the freedom privacy granted to an old and trusted servant.

"Happy? In the Empire?" Kirk's voice held a sardonic note, but Farrell knew exactly what he meant.

"Well, let's say she's an unhappy ship. Pike's well hated."

"Yeah. That doesn't surprise me."

"I've had several asking what you're like as Master."

"Already?"

"Says a lot, doesn't it? I told 'em you pay well. They're interested," he reported succinctly.

"Good, Jon. Good."

"Pike - he doesn't pay. Not even the crew bonus. And anyone who objects..."

"Agony Booth?"

Farrell nodded. "Men have died in there." His lips tightened. "Women, too. There's one in there now - unconscious."

"The one we saw?"

"No. Another one."

"Another...? What had *she* done?"

"Spilled His Lordship's brandy."

"You're joking." He looked at the disgusted expression in Farrell's eyes. "You're not."

"As for the one we saw before - "

"She wouldn't go to Pike's bed."

"I don't blame her. Even the Agony Booth's better."

"Huh?"

"The last woman he bedded died of a ruptured gut a couple of days later. He'd beaten her up first. Gets kicks out of sadism." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Another one got pregnant; he ordered an abortion and made the Doc sterilise her at the same time - for her carelessness. And... " He hesitated.

"Go on."

"Children. Any planet that resists - once it's beaten, he demands so many high-born children as hostage for their adults' behaviour. And yes, they do end up in a Starbase eventually; servants - no, slaves - to high-up officers and their ladies. But by the time they get there, Pike's had them all in bed. Boys as well as girls - and as young as five." He looked sick.

Kirk muttered an expressive Andorian curse, learned from a fellow victim of Kodos the Executioner - a victim who had not survived the Massacre of Tarsus. For anyone who understood Andorian it left no doubt where the recipient's final destination was wished to be.

"I could wish him worse than that," Farrell muttered. Kirk nodded, his face grim. Service in the Empire was no place for the squeamish, but the deliberate illtreatment of the helpless was guaranteed to infuriate Farrell, who had never forgotten his humble beginnings. Kirk, too, while he could be ruthless when ruthlessness was called for, had learned on Tarsus, if nowhere else, what it was like to be young and helpless.

"Don't worry, Jon. I'll get him." Kirk's voice was soft but held a determined note.

"Be careful, Jim," Farrell said quietly. He knew Kirk's often impetuous nature well.

"Very careful," Kirk agreed. "Now - what about - "

He was interrupted by the intercom as it buzzed sharply for attention.

"Commander Kirk report to Captain Pike's quarters immediately."

Kirk flicked a switch. "On my way."

Farrell followed Kirk out of his cabin, falling into step the regulation pace behind him, his face the expressionless mask of the hired killer.

Pike was sitting at his desk when Kirk entered, a discontented expression on his face. He scowled at Kirk as his new second-in-command halted in front of the desk, snapping off a precise salute.

"Stupid bitches, women - all of them," Pike growled.

Unsure of the reply expected of him, Kirk remained silent.

"Spill your brandy... won't come to your bed... " Pike muttered viciously. "Don't know what's good for them." He glared up at Kirk. "What do you think?"

"Discipline must be maintained." No matter that he was parrotting the unofficial motto of Starfleet; it committed him to nothing.

"You're damn right. So that obstinate bint can just take full intensity in the Booth until she says yes - and she can get through her work, too."

Kirk whistled silently to himself as he fought to remain expressionless. Starfleet was no place for a weakling, and punishments were usually brutal, but even Starfleet accepted that someone exposed to full duration in the Booth was entitled to a little recovery time before returning to duty. Far from permitting that, Pike was condemning his victim to working overtime to make up for the hours she spent in the Booth for what was, in the last resort, a fairly minor 'crime'.

. He must have been unsuccessful in completely masking his expression, for Pike glared at him. "I take it you disagree?"

"It's your decision, Captain. Discipline is all-important. If an underling once ceases to fear you, your career could be finished." That at least was true.

Pike's glare continued undiminished. "And you, Kirk - do you fear me?" He was toying with a small dagger.

Kirk watched Pike's hands cautiously. "You have a widespread reputation for running a tight ship, sir. I would be chary of crossing you." That, too, was true. He had every intention of biding his time, of not moving until he saw an infallible opportunity of doing away with Pike. His first move would also be his last; if it failed, he knew he would not get a second chance.

Normally he might have been expected to make some mention of "profiting from Pike's leadership", but the phrase had two meanings; he already knew from Farrell that he could forget the financial profit and he had no wish to learn Pike's professional methods - and he could not bring himself to lie.

"You would be wise to remain chary." The voice was cold, vibrant with hidden menace. Kirk heard a silent echo of Farrell's voice - *Men have died in the Booth...*

"Now - " Pike suddenly became brisk, businesslike. "Your duties."

The list was comprehensive, and included several duties that the Captain

would normally assume personally.

Kirk assessed them mentally, considered what he had *not* been told to do, and his contempt for Pike increased.

Pike wanted all the advantages - and none of the disadvantages - of command.

Finally, Pike scowled at his subordinate. "Any questions?"

"No, sir." In fact, he had several, but it was the only sensible reply to make. He resigned himself to a position as Pike's whipping dog - for a little while.

"Dismissed."

Outside, he nodded to Farrell, who fell into step behind him once more. Neither spoke as they strode along the corridor; both suspected that among the neatly spaced crewmen busily painting the ceiling there were some who, from fear, would immediately report any unwary comments to Pike.

And Kirk was beginning to wonder just how much time off anyone - except Pike, of course - actually had.

It was customary for one of an officer's personal guard to ward the cabin door while his master was inside; but any officer new on board any ship was only able to take with him one of his bought men, officially as his yeoman. Once on board, of course, it was possible for him to arrange for any others of his men that he might want to be transferred to his new ship. Kirk felt no particular loyalty to the men he had left behind, however; apart from Farrell there had never been any that he considered irreplaceable. But it would take some days for Farrell to assess the reliability of the men on the Enterprise and recruit his new guard.

Farrell could not, however, remain on duty day and night until he recruited a new personal guard. Kirk beckoned him into the cabin.

"You've put out feelers already for recruits." It was not a question. "How long before you actually take any of them on?"

"A day or two," Farrell said. "Some of them were almost too keen. I want to listen around the gossip..."

"If there is any," Kirk commented. "I'm sure Pike has his spies... "

"Sure he does. But the crew'll know them, keep quiet when they're about. You can't keep a crew from talking, Jim. Not even when there's a sadist at the top. In fact, that's when they'll often talk most. They have to get the complaints off their chests."

"You've got a point there. Want to go off now and make a start?"

"Can do."

"O.K., take a couple of hours, then come back and we'll go and get a meal."

"Will do."

Kirk watched him leave, then security locked the door. He was not too worried about his safety as yet - even the most ambitious junior would require time to come up with a plot to dispose of him, for they would certainly want time to assess what weaknesses he might have - but there was no point in taking an unnecessary chance. Then he flicked on his viewer and called up ship's records.

Working hours... He stared at the screen in blank disbelief.

Two shifts on and one off?

Standard hours were one shift on and two off. Established emergency procedure allowed for one on and one off - but he had never heard of any crew being expected to work two on and one off under any circumstances.

It certainly explained why the ship was so unnaturally clean. The extra shifts were spent scrubbing down and painting - with the cost of the paint deducted from the crew's wages.

Kirk frowned. Was Pike so sure of the efficacy of the fear he held over everyone's heads that he risked such a dangerous course?

He investigated further.

The officers' allowances were untouched. So - Pike retained that much sense. An officer who assassinated the Captain was tacitly patted on the back for removing an inefficient senior; but a crewman who attempted it (unless he was protected by being the personal guard of an officer and acting either with him or on his orders) was considered guilty of murder or attempted murder and executed - painfully.

Certainly, if an officer was hated sufficiently by everyone, it was possible for Security to fail to capture the crewman who killed him, with the unspoken agreement of the other officers; even Starfleet Command was forced to accept a malfunction in the security system, a blank in the tape, a lack of witnesses... but Pike was clearly cunning enough to maintain the loyalty of his senior officers by leaving them their basic pay and allowances even when they got little in the way of bonuses.

Kirk checked on, careful not to spend an excessive amount of time over each record, knowing that the Security Chief would be aware of his use of the computer. He could, however, justify it as long as he accessed each record for only long enough to study it; not even the paranoid Pike could deny the new First Officer's right to familiarise himself with the crew and the way the ship was run.

Most of the crew records were run-of-the-mill, nothing particularly outstanding either for or against any individual. One or two had an unusually high record of sessions in the Agony Booth against them. Moreau had the highest number of punishments recorded; of the men, Sulu had the greatest number. He was also one of several crew, the rest of them women, who had a record of a lengthy period in sickbay almost immediately following their last session in the Booth. Kirk frowned slightly, remembering something Farrell had said.

Eventually he reached the 'Punishments' record, and nodded, unsurprised, as he registered the 'official' reason for each punishment.

Not even the Captain could falsify the duration and extent of each use of the Agony Booth, but he *could* falsify the reason. 'Insolence' appeared with almost monotonous regularity. 'Carelessness with Empire equipment'. 'Laziness'. 'Disobedience' - though that appeared less often. Most were offences that would normally be punished by the agoniser; only a martinet or a sadist would use the Booth at such intensity for those particular 'crimes'.

Kirk was certain that 'disobedience' and 'insolence' covered Pike's spiteful reaction to being refused, but there was nothing here that an ambitious First Officer could use to plant doubts of Pike's rationality in the collective mind of

Starfleet Command - the sole method other than assassination that could speed up promotion, and a more risky one too, for Starfleet Command had been known to leave a raving lunatic in a position of authority when he could continue to produce results.

And Pike did produce results, as Kirk quickly discovered when he called up the log for the past year - the record he had chosen to leave until last, reckoning that he could read between the lines more readily if he had some background knowledge of the ship, her crew, and how Pike operated. However, he viewed with a cynical eye the reports of success in first contact missions; now that he knew how Pike worked, Kirk could see a succession of tortured planetary leaders trying to buy release, little guessing that the moment the Empire knew that the planet possessed valuable assets, it was doomed; to annexation if it was reasonably developed, to slavery if it was primitive and weak.

The only escape was the unlikely chance that the planet had no exploitable resources - and Kirk did not recall hearing of even one planet so poor that the Empire could find nothing worth seizing.

It was perfectly possible however to accomplish the takeover with subtlty. Garrovick had shown him that - and Garrovick's record, until his ship was invaded by a gaseous creature whose touch was death, had been fully as impressive as Pike's.

Not that Garrovick had been in any way weak. He had known when to be ruthless too. He punished treachery without mercy. The difference was - Garrovick had not enjoyed it.

It was Garrovick, too, who had taught him a valuable lesson; that self-interest was a powerful motivating factor, and the certainty of reward was usually more persuasive than fear. Fear could drive a man - or a race - to desperation, since a man driven to desperation might very well feel that he had nothing left to lose; that even death was preferable to enduring even one more day of terror.

Yes; it would probably be very easy to buy Pike's personal guard... and probably most of the officers, too.

There were two of the officers who were unknown quantities; Spock and Sulu. And he was not altogether sure that he trusted Mitchell. There was something about Mitchell... nothing positive, nothing he could put a finger on, but he did not like the man.

Of the other two, he suspected that Sulu would never trust another senior officer, and that he would be wise to keep a cautious eye on the Helmsman. Whatever the limits of Sulu's ambitions had once been, it was certain that he would now seek to rise as high as possible - the higher the rank the more likely a target, but the less chance of being dominated.

And Spock?

Kirk doubted that the Vulcan approved of Pike, and doubted even more that the Vulcan respected Pike; but he was of too high a rank to be forced to go to Pike's bed, which was probably the one sure way to alienate a Vulcan. Vulcans were known to be completely loyal to their commanding officers, although it was also known that they expected their commanding officers to be equally loyal to them.

Ah - perhaps that was the key to Spock.

Was Pike loyal to anyone except Pike? So far Kirk had seen no sign of it.

He sighed, then closed down the computer, starting to rise preparatory to moving into the sleeping area, planning a quick wash before dinner. It was Farrell's task to recruit as many of the crew as possible to the service of the new First Officer; it was Kirk's own job to persuade the officers to back him when he moved against Pike.

A thought struck him, and he sank back into his chair.

His success in getting the crippled Farragut back to a Starbase had brought him to the notice of Starfleet Command, and had won him a promotion on merit to third in command of the Lexington. He had been on the Lexington for less than a year when this further promotion had landed in his lap. He was capable of holding down the job, he knew, and quite clearly Starfleet also believed him capable, but he could not deny that he was very young for his present position. Had Starfleet assigned him here deliberately, knowing that he would inevitably compare Pike with Garrovick of the Farragut and Wesley of the Lexington? Had Starfleet assigned him here in order to get rid of Pike, despite the man's success? Had Starfleet Command seen through Pike, realised that his brutality could be sufficient to cause a rebellion?

It was, he decided, well within the bounds of possibility.

The buzzer sounded; when he unlocked the door, Farrell entered.

"I'll just be a minute." Kirk headed off for his shower.

As it happened, an opportunity to rid himself of Pike arose much sooner than he had any right to expect.

The summons to Pike's quarters was quite unexpected. The Captain never invited anyone to enter his cabin except Dr. Piper and those unfortunate underlings unlucky enough to catch his eye. Kirk knew how lucky he had been with Garrovick - and with Wesley, too. Certainly, on the Lexington he had been too high-ranked to be victimised, but he had never seen Wesley take advantage of any of the crew. Here, he was glad that he was by far too senior to be fair game to Pike.

He buzzed at the door; the "Come" sounded slurred, and on entering he found that Pike was drunk, lying back in his chair, a half-full glass on the desk in front of him, beside an almost empty bottle. One hand lay on the desk near the glass; the other hung limply, out of sight.

It would be easy to kill him now, flashed though Kirk's mind. *Too easy. This is a trap.*

"Yes, Captain?" He was careful not to allow his contempt to show.

Pike waved a too-casual hand towards the viewer on his desk, inviting Kirk closer. The way the viewer was angled, it would be perfectly natural for the First Officer to move around the desk, closer to his almost-incapable Captain... and kill him.

Far too easy.

Kirk moved forward to the desk, reached out and swung the viewer round. Even as he studied the verbal report on the screen, his peripheral vision was registering Pike.

The Captain had suddenly sobered. He sat forward and, thinking himself unobserved, slid a phaser out of sight, his attention apparently on Kirk.

"What do you think, Kirk?"

He had not even the subtlty to maintain the pretence that he was half drunk, and Kirk, who had silently acknowledged to himself that Pike's move was cunning enough to trap someone less cautious than himself, found his Captain not only dropping back to square one but actuallygoing down yet another notch in his estimation.

"The Vegan miners are expressing dissatisfaction with the level of taxation being levied," Kirk said slowly, mentally interpreting the double talk on the screen. For the first time, he looked directly at Pike. "A revolt appears imminent."

Pike nodded. "That's how I read it."

"We're the nearest ship?"

"Yes." There was a cold satisfaction in Pike's voice.

Kirk allowed his own eyes to narrow, as if calculatingly. "Once in orbit, might it be... advantageous... to wait until the miners actually rebel? Or even... to push them until they do?" His tone made a question of it, rather than the suggestion it was. He was sure that Pike would grasp the suggestion and claim it as his own.

"Just what I was about to say," Pike commented. Avarice showed in his eyes, and Kirk knew that the bait had been taken.

The trip to Vega 9 took two days. Kirk barely had a moment to himself - and neither did Farrell.

The First Officer knew that his timing had to be exact. Move too soon and Pike would have his hide; too late and he would fall with Pike - not all the way, but his opportunities would be drastically reduced, probably permanently. It might suit some men to be Captain of a scout ship, but for a man who had been First Officer on a Starship such a position it would be a terrible disgrace.

As Farrell moved among Pike's men, recruiting them to Kirk's service, the First Officer altered the duty rosters so that when the ship reached Vega everyone on duty would be either his men or Scott's - the Engineer, he knew, had no wish for a command that would take him from his engines. It took a certain amount of ingenuity, and he had to hope that Sulu, Chekov and Spock would not interfere, for he had nobody available to fill those positions. He did feel reasonably confident of Sulu, who had every reason to hate Pike, while Chekov, too junior to be a direct threat to him, would almost certainly see Pike's removal as an opportunity for advancement with no danger to himself. But what of Spock? Vulcan loyalty to a commander might take precedence over what Kirk was only guessing was the Science Officer's dislike of Pike's behaviour. He was the completely unknown factor.

Pike would suspect nothing, for Kirk knew that he had disarmed Pike's suspicions of him. He had ignored the 'chance' Pike had set up, and he was sure Pike lacked the understanding to realise that Kirk had seen through the trap. It was also possible that the man's egoism was sufficient to persuade him that Kirk - who was known to have made no moves against either of his previous Captains - would be equally loyal to his third.

Well, if that was the case, he would soon learn his error.

"Approaching Vega, sir." Sulu's

voice was cold, unemotional.

"Assume standard orbit," Pike ordered. He sounded expectant, and Kirk knew that Pike was mentally counting his profits.

"Standard orbit, sir."

"Communications - contact the colonists."

"I have the Governor, sir," Uhura said after a brief delay.

"On the main screen, Lieutenant."

Governor Fayah's face shimmered into view. It bore an almost desperate expression.

"Pike, commanding the Enterprise. What's all this nonsense about a complaint?"

"No nonsense, Captain Pike, but the understandable dissatisfaction of men who see fully three-quarters of their income taken in taxation. We have no hope of ever saving enough money to retire. We seek only a reduction in our taxation to nearer the general level levied on the Empire's home planets."

"The cost of establishing your colony and providing the mining equipment must be met," Pike said. The words were reasonable; the tone was not.

"We estimate that we have repaid that twice over."

"If the Empire High Council deems it necessary you will pay the amount three times over," Pike snarled.

"Then I have no option but to declare Vega 9 an independent planet," Fayah said. "I have the authority of my people to make this decision. We are no longer part of the Empire!"

Pike stood. From his post beside the library computer, Kirk turned; his phaser whined and Pike dropped, dead.

Then Kirk strode forward, confidence in his every move.

"You would defy the Empire?" he asked, his voice deceptively quiet.

"We reject the Empire," Fayah replied equally quietly, although shock at the events he had just involuntarily witnessed was still clear on his face.

"I ask you to reconsider your decision."

"Will the Empire reduce the level of our taxation?"

"I have no authority to make such a concession," Kirk told him. "I can, of course, carry your appeal to the High Council."

Fayah shook his head. "We have already made such an appeal, nearly a year ago. We received no answer. We repeated it a month ago. There was still no answer. There seems little point in repeating it again. No - I have declared Vega 9 independent of the Empire. We will pay no more taxes; we give the Empire nothing, and ask the Empire for nothing."

"So be it." Kirk made a cutting gesture with his hand and Uhura cut contact. "Mr. Chekov."

"Yes, sir?"

"Programme phasers on the mining settlement - if the mines themselves are damaged I'll have your hide."

Chekov flicked switches. "Phasers

programmed and ready, sir."

"Fire."

The few miners who survived the first barrage surrendered, of course.

Kirk beamed down with a security detachment into the centre of chaos. The settlement was a total wreck. Some buildings were still burning. Bodies lay everywhere. Some of the handful of survivors had phaser burns of varying severity.

Kirk steeled himself against the pity he felt. The terror must be maintained or the Empire was finished.

There was hatred in the eyes of the miners who met Kirk, and he knew that it was only the phasers of his guards that kept him alive. These miners would die gladly if they could only dispose of him first.

One of the older men stepped forward to act as spokesman.

"Where is Governor Fayah?" Kirk asked sharply before the man had a chance to speak.

"Dead." The miner gestured towards one of the still-burning buildings. "My name is Loftus. I'm one of the foremen - the senior man left alive."

"Kirk, in command of the Enterprise." He looked sternly round the group of miners. "Be glad that my predecessor is no longer in command of the Enterprise," he added, keeping his voice matter-of-fact. "He would not have left any of you alive."

"Captain Kirk, the miners here are desperate. We have been forced to submit this time, but unless the level of taxation is reduced, even the memory of this - " he gestured around the ruined settlement - "will not prevent another revolt. We have repaid - and more than repaid - the cost of setting up the colony; we owe the Empire nothing. By now we should be paying only the standard rate of tax."

"All I can do is deliver your message to the High Council," Kirk said quietly. "Meanwhile - the Empire's laws must be upheld. I have the authority to impose a fine - "

"A fine? Captain, we have nothing left - nothing!"

"A shipment of ore, perhaps, waiting to be uplifted?"

"Well, yes - "

"That will be sufficient."

"But we have a contract! Nondelivery has a penal clause... and we need the income from that load to buy food... and we'll be taxed on its value, too - "

"There are fewer of you to feed now," Kirk reminded him, a hint of mockery in his voice. In fact, he felt a great deal of sympathy for the position in which these miners found themselves, but he had his own position to think of. He still needed to prove himself ruthless so that Starfleet Command would confirm him in his self-promoted position, and the 'fine' would be useful to help buy the loyalty of his crew, to show any doubters that it was in their own interests to support him.

"Then you might as well kill us now. It would be more merciful," Loftus said quietly, his voice bitter.

"I gave specific orders that the mines be left intact," Kirk said. "Diligent attention to your job will give you an even chance of replacing the confiscated ore. You will, of course, need to begin immediately."

"But... but we need to bury our dead. If we don't, disease - "

"That is easily dealt with." He glanced around at his men. "Dispose of those bodies."

Phasers set to vaporise whined. Among the group of miners, a man moved as if to rush forward, crying, "No! Cliff!" He was held back by two of his fellows. Kirk looked at Loftus.

"His brother. Their religion believes in interment," Loftus explained.

"Too bad." Kirk had no sympathy with that preference, for he believed that cremation, by fire or phaser, was cleaner and more hygienic than interment. He returned his attention to his men.

"Mr. Hainez, take half the men. Vaporise any bodies you find."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk turned back to Loftus. "I'm declaring you temporary Governor," he said. "Makes your position official." He glared at the foreman miner. "That means you are now answerable for the behaviour of the others."

Loftus gave a helpless shrug. "Miners are an independent lot, Captain. If they decide to rebel again, I can't stop them."

"If you value your life - you'll find a way," Kirk told him.

. . . . . .

As the buzzer sounded, Kirk looked up from the clutter of Pike-neglected paperwork that littered the Captain's desk .

"Come."

Spock entered, crossing briskly to the desk. "I have a valuation on the ore, Captain. Approximately five million credits."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted. "That good?"

"Yes, Captain. It's a particularly rich ore. I suspect that the miners were holding on to it for a private buyer in an attempt to avoid paying the full tax on it."

"By passing it off as standard ore?"

"It seems probable." He allowed himself a half smile. "Do you have a buyer in mind?"

"I hadn't thought about it," Kirk admitted. "I was waiting for your report... but this is far better than I'd dared to hope."

"There is a merchant on Vulcan who would give you the full market value for it," Spock suggested.

"You can contact him?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then do so." He hesitated. "Spock - "

"Yes, Captain?"

"I'll need a First Officer. Would you be interested in the position?"

"I do not look for command, Captain. I prefer my scientific duties."



Kirk grinned. "Which - from my point of view - makes you an excellent choice for First Officer, doesn't it?"

"I comprehend that you do not wish for a First Officer who would seek to remove you... as you removed Captain Pike."

Kirk shrugged. "He rather asked for it - wouldn't you say?"

"Indeed, you picked your moment well," Spock agreed. "I assume you persuaded him that firmness was the answer, and thus ensured continued resistance? Then, when the rebels announced their withdrawal from the Empire, you acted, your excuse - if one were needed - being that he caused the revolt; and you ensured for yourself the credit for suppressing it. You have established yourself as a Captain who will serve Starfleet well.

"For yourself - calling your... acquisition... of the ore a 'fine' was clever. Captain Pike was never so subtle," he added thoughtfully. "He preferred outright theft, and of course his victims habitually hid as much as they could, although I doubt he ever realised it. Your method appears to be more productive."

Kirk nodded, his mind already busy considering the subject. "I understand that Captain Pike did not give crew bonuses."

"Correct."

"Well, that's about to change. Ten percent each to Captain and First Officer, 30% split between the other senior officers - ie heads of department - and the remaining 50% split among the crew depending on rank. I'll let you work out the amounts."

"That will be a popular move, Captain."

"I'm about to make another one. As of now, we're reverting to the standard one shift on and two off."

"That will gain you much support among the crew."

"I thought it might. But seriously - the continuous repainting is not necessary. It's makework. I expect the crew to jump to it when they're on duty and when there's a yellow alert. I expect strict discipline to be maintained. But I see no reason why the crew should not be permitted time to relax. It improves efficiency."

That had been a maxim of Garrovick's. Kirk had no qualms at adopting it as his own, for he intended to make Garrovick his model.

"I believe that may indeed be true for Humans, Captain," Spock said slowly.

"For Humans? What about Vulcans?"

"Vulcans do not require the activities that Humans call recreation, Captain. On my planet, to rest is to rest - to cease using energy. A Vulcan obtains relaxation through meditation."

"Yes, of course." Kirk had known only one other Vulcan, years previously, who had also spoken of the value of meditation as a means of relaxing. He had taught Kirk how to meditate, and the Human still found it helpful when he was particularly stressed. He was not about to admit that, however.

As he had intended, Spock took his comment as an acceptance of Vulcan custom unusual in a Human.

"Next - Ensign Moreau. Her

sentence to the Agony Booth is cancelled immediately, and she's to get three days sick leave, my responsibility. She can apply to Piper for medication if she wants." She would probably pass up the opportunity - sickbay was nearly as bad for the crew as the Booth, with painkillers dispensed with a miserly hand and severely injured personnel often being used as test subjects for new treatments or experiments. Even the senior officers were not automatically immune; a wise Captain cultivated his Chief Medical Officer.

"Yes, sir."

Kirk thought he saw a spark of approval in the dark eyes and knew that Spock had indeed despised Pike's methods.

"Finally - you didn't answer me earlier. Be my First Officer - at least temporarily - until Starfleet gets round to assigning one."

"Very well."

Kirk knew that with luck Starfleet would accept his choice of Spock as First Officer, especially if he was able to combine the post with that of Science Officer which he already held, for it would save most of a senior officer's pay. Holding a double post, Spock would be paid at the senior rate plus 25% of the rate for the lesser position.

It was of course possible that the increase in pay alone would tempt Spock into retaining the double post; Kirk planned on insisting - if necessary - that he get the double bonus as First Officer and as Head of Department. Not that he anticipated having to do much persuading; while it was possible that Spock, like Kirk himself, had a private income, only a fool turned down the chance of increasing his personal fortune.

And that, if nothing else, would buy Spock, keeping between him and an ambitious junior a Vulcan, with Vulcan operatives, who had reached the height of his ambition.

The fact that he liked the Vulcan was merely a fortunate bonus.

Kirk's self-acquired promotion was confirmed without demur, and he was even privately congratulated by Admiral Komack for retrieving the situation Pike had escalated. Komack also implied that Starfleet was grateful to Kirk for ridding them of Pike. Starfleet Captains were expected to be ruthless and few questions were asked regarding their methods, but Pike's methods had long been known to be extreme.

Starfleet also confirmed Spock's promotion, not altogether to the Vulcan's satisfaction.

His watch finished, he retired to his cabin to consider his position.

Kirk had pressured him into temporary acceptance of the position. He had been willing to oblige Kirk as a temporary measure, but he had not realised that he might be landed permanently with the post. Although it was not unknown for a junior officer to hold down two positions, he had not expected Starfleet to agree to anyone holding two senior appointments, and he had had every intention of refusing to trade his place as Science Officer for that of First Officer by pointing out that he was one of the Empire's most highly qualified scientists and that it would not be in Starfleet's best interests to lose his scientific expertise.

Certainly, as he had to admit to himself, it would be quite a challenge to

hold down the double position. Interesting as his scientific duties were, and with considerable opportunity for private research, he seldom felt challenged. He was, quite simply, too good at his job for it to provide him with much of a challenge. His new position would certainly do that.

He flicked on the intercom.

"Spock to Security. Lt. Solan, report to my quarters." Without waiting for an acknowledgement he closed the connection and moved to sit behind his desk.

The buzzer sounded within two minutes.

"Fh'ler'ig."

The door swished open to admit his top operative. Spock waved towards the chair opposite him, and Solan sat, giving the gesture that indicated respect for a superior.

Not even the members of the Security department knew which of them was in the dreaded secret police. The one thing that was certain was that at least one, and probably more, of the Security guards was also in the secret police. If there was more than one, even each of them did not know which of the others it was.

Although the senior officers were supposed to be trustworthy and free from surveillance by Security, Spock was quite certain that all the cabins had a surveillance unit tucked away somewhere - he did not trust the integrity of anyone in the Secret Police - and besides, it was a wise officer who took steps to ensure that his privacy would remain inviolate. Spock's own method was to talk to his operatives in the dialect of his home region - its resemblance to standard Vulcan defeated the translator - since all his operatives came from his father's estate, intelligent villeins granted the opportunity of bettering their position and tied to him through gratitude for that opportunity and also through generations of loyalty to his family... and additionally, to a certain degree, by the fear that if they failed him and lived their families might suffer - though with the positive knowledge that if they died in his service, even vainly, their families would be well compensated. Vulcans were ruthless towards their enemies, but loyalty towards their own was highly regarded, and a landowner's responsibility for the welfare of his faithful servants was one of the pillars on which their civilisation stood.

It amused Spock to think of the secret police's futile rage at being unable to understand his conversations with his men - for of course they could not admit openly that they spied on his cabin - and even if they did, he had every right to use his own local dialect when speaking to his men.

Solan waited until it pleased his master to speak.

And waited.

It seemed that Spock was in no hurry to inform his operative of what was in his mind, but Solan sat patiently; it ill became a mere villein, even one raised to an important position, to express curiosity or seek to hurry his master.

Had he only known, Spock's mind was far away; recalling his early days in Starfleet.

On the basis of his Academy marks, which were the highest ever recorded, Spock had been assigned to the Beagle immediately following his graduation instead of gaining

experience aboard a smaller survey vessel first.

His attention to detail quickly brought him to the attention of Commander Hanssen, the then Science Officer.

A mere Ensign did not normally rate any operatives; his position was rarely at risk. Neither, however, was an Ensign normally taken as an operative by one of the senior officers. Hanssen, never predictable, approached Spock and offered him a position as one of his men.

Spock hesitated, considering his own future.

"If I accept this position, how will it affect my prospects for promotion?" he asked bluntly. "I do not wish to remain an Ensign for ever."

"It would be a waste of your scientific ability," Hanssen agreed. "I would not attempt to block your promotion, and as one of my declared men you would actually have increased opportunity to participate in landing party duty, thus widening your experience."

So Spock, though not without a few residual doubts, became one of Hanssen's operatives.

The two years he spent in that position had indeed been a profitable period for the young Vulcan. Hanssen had been as good as his word; promotion to Lieutenant, on merit, had come inside the first year. In addition, Hanssen gave him more and more responsibility, and did not regret it.

Twice in those years Spock stepped between Hanssen and an assassination attempt. The first was a botched affair by one of the senior Lieutenants who wanted to advance a step closer to the position of Science Officer; the second was more ingenious, and prevented only because Spock noticed the out of place wire that would have electrocuted his senior officer. The author of that attempt remained undiscovered, but both Hanssen and Spock suspected Sitchi, Hanssen's second; so Spock quietly and efficiently arranged an accident for Sitchi, using Solan, a young Vulcan from his father's estate who had recently obtained a position on board through Spock's influence and whose loyalty to Spock was complete.

With Sitchi's death, Spock moved a step up the ladder of promotion.

And then Hanssen died in a landing party accident, a rockfall that nobody could have foreseen. Spock, working at Hanssen's side, was injured, and might even have been killed as well had Solan, working with him as unskilled help, not pulled him clear. Solan had then tried to reach Hanssen as well but had been knocked unconscious by a falling stone.

Both Vulcans were seriously enough hurt that Captain Merrick decided to leave them both at Starbase 8 until they recovered.

It was their good luck. The Beagle set off again - and disappeared without trace.

Spock - taking Solan with him - was assigned, despite his youth, as a senior scientist on the Enterprise. Hanssen had been as good as his word; better than his word, for the reports he had sent Starfleet on his Vulcan junior were positively glowing.

Spock promptly contacted his father and arranged for three more of his dependants - one a woman to be his yeoman - to be recruited into Starfleet and assigned to the Enterprise. The woman would also be insurance against pon farr, not only for himself but for all his men.

He then sat down and considered his position.

He was now senior enough to be a possible target for an ambitious junior. He had already taken one defensive measure. What others could he take?

He could use Vulcan mysticism. Most of his crewmates were Human, and - as he had

discovered - regarded Vulcans with a superstitious eye. With Vulcan operatives whose complete loyalty was assured to back him, and a little misdirection, he could practically ensure for himself a reputation that would make most of the juniors avoid him, choosing instead any other of the seniors for an assassination attempt.

It had worked.

He waited, biding his time while further promotion came through merit - and the ambitions of others. His plans were successful; within eight years he had risen to second in the Science section without once disposing of a senior officer on his own account - others had done that - and without once having to counter an attempt on his own life.

During those years there had been two attempts to kill the Science Officer, one completely unsuccessful and the other - which was responsible for Spock's promotion to second - missing the Science Officer but killing his second. Two very junior scientists, brothers, were condemned to the Agony Booth for it, and one of them died there.

Spock kept a cautious eye on the survivor who, he was sure, had not lost one iota of his ambition, but either the youngster had been led by his brother or he had learned caution, for he made no other obvious move to push himself forward. It was as well; he was not a particularly inspired scientist, and although he was competent enough at routine laboratory research Spock would at that time have felt it his duty to Starfleet to dispose of him if he had obtained promotion by any method. As it was, he made sure that Carstairs was kept busy at the work he could do well, and even gave him a degree of responsibility in the lab in an attempt to keep the lad satisfied with what he could do.

A few months later, Science Officer Ruykens died. A simple appendix operation that was botched - and Spock was far from sure that it was not deliberate; a subtle opportunist assassination. It was not however easy to see who would benefit from it apart from himself, and he could find no link between any of the junior science staff and the medical staff.

And as he stepped into his new position, Spock realised that he must regard the medical section as possible enemies too.

He contacted his father for a further six men, specifying that two at least should have medical training.

In the years since he had quietly reorganised the Science Department, transferring anyone of whom he had doubts by recommending them for promotion. He was left with a department of skilled but unambitious scientists. The only one remaining of whom he had any doubts was Carstairs.

He had had a lengthy discussion with the young man, who had placed all the blame for the assassination attempt on his brother, saying that he had merely supported him; and admitted that he knew he was best at laboratory routine.

Spock decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, for he was by then proving to be a reliable research assistant who could, in a year or two, be promoted to be Chief of Research; but at the same time he assigned two of his new operatives as lab assistants, with instructions to keep an eye on Carstairs.

And so far, Carstairs had made no suspicious moves.

It was the steadiness of the Science Department, in part, that encouraged Spock to accept Kirk's offer of the post of First Officer, never expecting it to be made permanent. Now that it was, he knew he must rethink his position.

He was not a target as Science Officer - not now. As First Officer, he was; and it would not be as easy to get rid of anyone he doubted throughout the ship in general, for many of the appointments were made direct by Starfleet. The men behind the desks too often had sons or daughters or grandchildren or nephews or

nieces, or their secretaries' children, or the children of someone to whom they owed a favour or wanted to have grateful to them.

At last, Spock raised his eyes from the surface of his desk.

"Solan, I will require several more operatives," he said bluntly.

Solan allowed one eyebrow to lift in enquiry, aware that Spock would permit the first and most trusted of his operatives that small impertinence, and continued to wait, knowing that he would learn his Master's mind in due course.

"Captain Kirk asked me to take on the position of First Officer as a temporary measure. Starfleet has confirmed me in that position."

Solan lowered his head in acknowledgement of the information. "May I ask if you are to continue as Science Officer?"

"I am."

"You will be well able to hold both positions, my Liege."

"I do not doubt it. However, it places me in a far more vulnerable position. Your task - and that of your men - is, as of now, more difficult, and will remain so."

"I understand." Solan gave no indication that he found the thought of the increased responsibility disconcerting. He had managed to save almost all of his Starfleet pay and had even added to it through a private enterprise, and the total was accumulating at a steady rate; he had been anticipating the day - certainly many years in the future - when Spock eventually returned to Vulcan, knowing that he would have enough money to purchase a small farm, possibly even one large enough for him to employ a man or two. He would remain Sarek's - or Spock's - feudal bondman, but he would be rich enough to be, in his own way, a minor feudal superior.

Spock's promotion suddenly threw that future into uncertainty. His loyalty to Spock was complete; as long as he performed well, his family on Vulcan was secure, his savings would go to them if he died; but he himself might not live to see his hoped-for ambition come to pass.

That he was the victim of a kind of moral blackmail never occurred to him. The people served their feudal superior, and in bad years their superior saw to it that they were fed. People who failed in their duty were simply evicted, and ended up labouring in towns, possibly their own masters but with no security.

In his years with Spock he had seen many social systems in operation, and had seen none that he felt gave most of the common people more security than Vulcan's. Most systems seemed to provide wealth without responsibility for the few, poverty without hope of relief for the many.

"I will be advancing at least three more helots to the position of liegemen, although I do not expect them to be ready for some months." Spock continued. "What training would you suggest for them?"

Solan thought for a moment, secretly pleased at the implied compliment; then he continued his thought aloud.

"Engineering is no danger to you. Yeoman Perra is yours. You have two liegemen in Science, two in Medical, one in Navigation; one in Stores, two in Maintenance. In Security there is only myself, although four Human guards will

follow me... It might be best to have more of your own men in Security."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Four Human guards?"

"They were unattached when they came on board some months ago. Even then I felt that it might be advantageous if you had additional operatives in my department, since there had already been one attempt on my life; I employed them as my operatives, on the understanding that they were also to consider themselves your men, my Liege."

"How do you pay them?" Spock was well aware that his Chief Operative had no official income other than his Starfleet pay; unlike the operatives of the Human officers, who were well paid for their loyalty, his Vulcans received no additional pay from him - protecting him was considered part of their feudal duty.

Solan permitted himself a half smile. "I run a fairly lucrative money-lending scheme, my Liege. The interest is relatively low - I charge only an initial twenty percent; the return is therefore excellent, since most of the men who wish to borrow come to me."

"Twenty percent?" Spock asked. "That is double what they would pay a bank."

"Yes, indeed, my Liege, but banks are far away; and since most 'Fleet lenders charge at least twenty five percent, my twenty percent is seen as highly favourable." He allowed his smile to broaden a little. "Some lend so much that it is impossible for the borrower ever to repay the loan; their entire pay, month by month, goes to repay the interest. I make sure that I lend no more than it is possible for the borrower to repay inside three months, loan and entire interest. They are then free to ask for another loan on the same terms. If, however, they do not pay back the whole inside three months, I then charge twenty five percent." He shrugged. "It is amazing how many cannot pay back a loan in three months; some Humans are unable to refrain from gambling in the hope of amassing a fortune overnight. There are at least five gambling schools on the ship. Only one of these is honest," he added as if in an afterthought. "The crew has not realised this yet."

"And you use this money to pay your operatives?"

"Yes, my Liege - and I still show a reasonable profit."

"Hmmm. Some time - not necessarily immediately, but fairly quickly - let me have a list of those of the crew who are in the habit of borrowing money; and a second list of those who gamble to excess. And the names of those who run the dishonest games." He did not approve of gambling, but it was accepted that those in the lower ranks must have some such 'entertainment' for their free time - and although in Pike's day free time had been limited, the crew's need for entertainment would have been correspondingly greater. The senior officers knew that gambling schools existed on all ships, but pretended not to know. "Is this the only purpose for which money is borrowed?"

"No, my Liege. Some of the female yeomen augment their pay by selling their bodies," Solan told him, distaste on his face. That Perra was, to all intents and purposes, a whore for the Vulcans on board did not occur to him as comparable, for she was not paid for her sexual services.

"Are there any bad debtors?" Spock asked.

"There are two who have not repaid their debts for many months; they gamble their pay the day they get it in the hope that a big win will enable them to pay me and still leave them money to spare. They smile behind my back because I do not insist on payment... and I have heard them suggest to others that they, too, should 'forget' to pay me. The others are wiser, for they realise that I only bide my time. One day I will claim payment, and when that day comes, I may not ask for money. These two are Sulu's men."

Spock smiled, understanding. "You have surprised me, Solan. I commend your initiative and your intelligence. I will not forget.

"Now - to return to business. The new liegemen will be trained for Security. Next - the Captain's men. I have no wish to become Captain; I am content with my scientific duties. This promotion will not interfere with these to any great extent; promotion to Captain assuredly would. It is in my own interests if you assist his men in keeping him alive.

"What is your opinion of the Captain's Chief Operative?"

"Farrell is completely loyal and appears to have a great deal of autonomous power. He had bought over most of Pike's henchmen into Kirk's service before the assassination."

"Astute, whichever of them thought of it."

"I believe it was initially Farrell's idea, my Liege, although Kirk would have to have approved it. Farrell does not have the income to pay these men himself. I have seen nothing that could be used to weaken his allegiance to Kirk; he is one of the few Humans on board who does not gamble, nor does he patronise any of the prostitutes. He has found a woman who shares his bed in return for his protection, but they appear to be genuinely attached to each other - even in Security the women often prefer to have a male protector," he added parenthetically. "At least half of Security is now in Kirk's direct employ. He does not, however, have men in any other department."

Spock grunted. Most senior officers employed as personal guards the men of their own departments; Captain and Security Officer between them employed most of Security. He was unusual in spreading his liegemen around so many departments; but he had seen assassination attempts that crossed departmental barriers.

"Loyal to him?"

"While he pays them. But he does pay well; he must have a considerable private income."

That was unusual. Most rich Humans stayed safe on Earth. Yet it was not, after all, so surprising. There was in Kirk a restlessness to do that Spock had already noted; a restlessness to accomplish; to seek excitement.

"Speak to Farrell. Point out to him that I am content as First Officer, and propose an alliance; although it might be wise for this to remain secret, even from the Captain, if Farrell will agree to this, and - as far as he is aware - from me.

"Now - is there anything you wish to bring to my notice?"

"Yes, my Liege. If our numbers are to increase, a second female would be of value. Perra has not complained, but I know she does not find it easy to accommodate so many of us and still perform her routine duties."

"You would accept a Vulcan female in Security?"

"Human females manage. Can a Vulcan do less?"

"Your pride in your planet is showing," Spock said lightly.

"I ask forgiveness, my Liege." Solan lowered his head.

"Unnecessary," Spock replied. "We both know that Vulcans are physically superior to Humans; and most are mentally superior to most Humans. That is fact.

"Do not forget, however, that our Captain is a superior Human. We would be foolish to underestimate his intelligence."

"I will not forget, my Liege."

The planet was uninhabited by any intelligent race. There were animals in plenty; even animals that showed signs of intelligent behaviour. But signs of a species that could develop a civilised culture there were none.

Most of the Science Department had beamed down once it was established that the planet had colonisation potential. On consideration Kirk had also ordered down most of the other crew members, telling Spock that they could at least take tricorder readings to be examined later in detail by Science. Only a skeleton crew was left on board the Enterprise.

The crew had been convinced to willing obedience by simple bribery.

"You all know the bonus paid to a ship that discovers an exploitable planet," Kirk had pointed out. This alone might not have persuaded them - in Pike's day it would not have done - but they had already learned that Kirk did pay crew bonuses. The Vegan affair had proved that; even the lowliest yeoman, a rank where chronic underpayment was the deliberate norm, had received a few credits.

So they plunged, with the enthusiasm of total ignorance, into the mysteries of planetary survey.

They were not careless; they were considered to be Empire property, and carelessness with Empire property was instantly punishable; they simply did not know how to interpret the readings. It was not long before a junior helmsman, too worried about the painful rash and swelling that were rapidly losing him the use of his hands to care about either punishment or the risk of being used for experiment by Piper, contacted the ship.

He was the first of several.

Piper came to the obvious conclusion; something on the planet was responsible. He promptly contacted Spock.

"I've got several patients up here," he reported. "Same symptoms - rash and swollen hands. First one who called in, the swelling is spreading up his arms."

"I would think... There's a plant here that gives poison readings. It's relatively common, but easy to avoid if you know what you're looking for. I take it none of the casualties is from Science?"

"Correct. They're all personnel who wouldn't normally be in a landing party."

"I'll send you up a sample of the plant."

. . . . . .

As Spock had said, the plant was common enough for him to obtain a sample without difficulty. He placed it in a collecting box and had it beamed up to the ship, where one of the medical orderlies collected it and took it to Piper.

The Doctor looked at it carefully, then ran his scanner over it and grunted. To his experienced eye the poison reading was clear, but he could appreciate that inexperienced crew, who had been told simply to gather data, would not be able to read it, if indeed they had even tried.

He punched the intercom. "Lab."

"Lab here, sir."

"I have a planet here for analysis."

"I'll send someone right down."

"Be careful; it's poisonous. If anyone in your department is affected, I'll use him for testing medication."

"Yes, sir." The line clicked shut.

Piper turned back to his patients and frowned as he studied the readings - especially the readings above Helmsman Tomasi's bed. His gaze shifted from the diagnostic panel to the man on the bed.

Tomasi's arms were so swollen that anyone could have been excused for thinking that they belonged to a three-day corpse bloated in death. The man's face was twisted with a pain that he was still attempting to keep unvoiced. Piper guessed that he would be unable to remain silent much longer - the pain level was high and rapidly getting higher.

The door opened and a lab assistant ran in. Piper nodded to the box containing the plant, the man grabbed it and ran out again. Piper grunted a reluctant approval as he mentally assessed the time since his call. The lab had wasted no time at all.

He moved forward towards Tomasi's bed, reluctantly deciding that the man had reached the limits of pain that he could be expected to endure. Even as Piper made his decision, Tomasi's control broke and he whimpered, a thin thread of sound.

Terror shone in his eyes as he realised Piper's proximity, and he tried to choke back the sound.

"No," he managed to gasp. "No... Please... "

"I've nothing to try yet," Piper told him. Any other attempt at reassurance would be worse than a lie, for Tomasi - as the first affected and most advanced case - was the obvious guinea pig to test whatever brew the lab concocted.

"No... " Tomasi gasped again, then he gave a choked scream, his head fell back and the diagnostic readings abruptly peaked - and then slid silently to zero.

Piper called an orderly. The quicker the autopsy was begun the quicker it would be done.

Gary Mitchell sighed resignedly. The thought of a second bonus, so soon after the first, was welcome; he needed some more extra cash quite urgently to settle a gambling debt. Solan had refused to lend him anything, frankly telling him that he was a bad risk, and he knew that Kelso was merely biding his time; if he was caught beating up another crewmember he would be instantly subject to the Agony Booth for damaging Empire property, but if he could catch his victim unaware and unseen, it was Mitchell who would go to the Booth for

doing something that left him at risk - and if he betrayed Kelso, he knew that he would suffer for it later. His only hope was to pay his debts - but he had no real friends who might help him, either financially or physically. This survey bonus was probably his last chance.

But welcome though the thought of clearing his debt to Kelso was, the work was utterly boring. Not for Mitchell the joys of fresh air and green grass. Now if they had been set to discover the weaknesses of an inhabited planet where one could see civilisation at work in the security of streets... and where there were females to be 'arrested'... and then allowed to 'buy' their freedom...

So he gathered records on his tricorder, being particularly careful now not to come into physical contact with any of the plants. Word had been passed round the crew members on the planet, and the non-scientific crew - most of them town bred, with no knowledge of the countryside - found themselves, without conscious volition, actively avoiding the plant life, whether dangerous or not. And while he worked, part of his attention was devoted to watching for the approach of anyone who might be particularly unfriendly.

It was because of this that he noticed Kirk's approach fractionally before Kirk became aware of him, and promptly assumed an air of total involvement in his work. Beside Kirk, the Captain's ever-present shadow Farrell grinned to himself - Kirk might not have been aware of it, but he had noticed Mitchell's sudden efficiency and mentally noted the information to be reported later.

Kirk paused beside the 'intent' Mitchell. "Ah, Mr. Mitchell. Finding anything interesting?"

Mitchell risked a quick, rueful grin. "I'm a navigator, sir, town bred. I don't know."

.Kirk returned the grin. "Par for the course, Mr. Mitchell."

The bushes beside them rustled, and something small scurried from the undergrowth, heading straight towards the men, pursued by a slightly bigger animal. The pursued animal veered sharply away when it saw them; the larger, pointed-faced beast kept going.

Rat! Mitchell registered with instantaneous revulsion as he remembered the rodents that battled with the slum children in almost every town on Earth. The rats usually won. His recoil was instinctive; he bumped into Kirk, throwing the Captain aside while the impact left him squarely in the creature's path, caught completely off balance.

The creature made no attempt to dodge - it was almost as if it didn't recognise that any biped the size of a man could be a danger to it. It bumped against Mitchell's leg and promptly bit deep, clawing a great tear in the cloth of the trousers with its paws; then with a squeal that could almost be described as disgust its teeth jerked away with a haste that gave the impression that had it been able to, it would have spat out saliva to rid itself of the taste. It dodged around the men and disappeared.

Mitchell looked down at the blood trickling from his leg as Farrell pulled Kirk to his feet - the whole incident had taken only seconds. Was it his imagination, or was his leg beginning to swell? Well, whether it was or not, it was dangerous to remain lying here when the Captain was present. Mitchell scrambled to his feet.

"Thanks," Kirk said.

Thanks? For a moment Mitchell was puzzled, then with a silent gasp of relief he realised that Kirk thought he had seen the danger and acted to save the Captain.

Kirk glanced at Farrell. "Is he - ?"

"No, Captain. He's nobody's man."

"Right, Mitchell - you're my man now; all right?"

Mitchell would have preferred to remain independent, his own man, but he was quick to see the advantages of being on the Captain's personal payroll. "Yes, sir!" He even managed to sound enthusiastic.

But pain coloured his voice too. Kirk looked down at the bleeding leg, the tooth marks plainly visible where the trouser leg was ripped.

"You'd best get that seen to."

The bite was indeed beginning to throb angrily, angrily enough that his instinctive dread of sickbay was being overwhelmed by the instinct to risk a doctor's attentions, but despite that Mitchell thought rapidly - more rapidly than he had ever done in his life. "There's nearly half the shift left, sir. I can't - "

"I'll see you get your full bonus."

"Thank you, sir." Mitchell was only half convinced that he would, but decided that it was best to act as if he had full confidence in the Captain's promise. He pulled out his communicator.

"Mitchell to Enterprise - beam me up, Captain's orders." He shimmered away.

Farrell gazed in silence for some moments at the space where Mitchell had been. "I don't trust him, Jim."

"Neither do I, Jon. But he certainly saved my skin just now."

"Yes, he did, didn't he. I wonder why?"

"Well, he wouldn't gain by my death. He's too junior."

"No, he wouldn't. Not obviously, not that I can see. But there could be an advantage that *he* can see."

"Don't we all act according to the personal advantages that we can see?" Kirk fell silent for a moment. "Know anything about him?"

Farrell shook his head. "Not much. He's a loner, but there's nothing unusual in that. Tends to be lazy. His sexual tastes are thought to be a bit like Pike's."

"Frequent, varied and preferably unwilling, huh?"

"Right. The only difference is that he seems to be completely hetero. Gets rid of most of his ardour on planetfall."

"Mm. And lazy?"

"Good at keeping his eyes open. A senior officer shows up, his nose is buried in his work. I saw when he saw you coming just now. That bit about half through the shift... he knew you'd insist he beam up."

"Well, let's face it, he's only down here for the bonus - like most of 'em. They don't even know what they're looking at. Bound to be boring."

"Don't let them hear you saying that," Farrell warned.

"Jon! When was I ever that stupid?"

Farrell was suddenly completely

serious again. "Never. But now you're at the top - you daren't slip, not for a moment. A moment's casual kindness when a man's hurt doing something for you - that's fair enough, the men understand that's a sort of payment. But understanding when they're bored? No - they'd take that for weakness."

Slowly, Kirk nodded. "Yes. I know." He sighed. "It's not easy being at the top."

"And it's not the safest place to be, either," Farrell commented as he began to follow Kirk back through the trees in search of more of the crew.

When he eventually returned to the ship, Kirk headed for sickbay. Piper glanced up from the record he was completing and his eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Captain?"

"What's the word on that poison plant?"

Piper shrugged. "I've got an antidote of sorts. Effective enough. Thomasi - he was the first one to report in - died before we found it. The others are all recovering. I'd recommend a couple of days off for them. Then I'll check 'em again."

"That severe, huh?"

"Yes. I think one at least will have to be invalided out of the service. There's signs that his heart was strained."

Kirk nodded. The unlucky crewman might get a small pension, if he was high enough ranked; he was more likely to get nothing. "What about Mitchell?"

"He said you sent him up?"

"That's right. He pushed me out of the way, took a rat bite that I'd have got."

"It was the same poison. The antidote worked for it too. We got him quick enough - he should be back on duty tomorrow."

"Good." Kirk swung round and left.

"Come."

Twenty-four hours had passed. Survey teams were still gathering data, but now, as well as watching out for the poison plants, each group had assigned to it a security guard whose task was to kill any of the rats that might appear. Kirk, satisfied that his men were doing their job satisfactorily, sat in his office dealing with the last of the routine paperwork that he had inherited, realising that it had to be done but thoroughly bored by it.

Spock entered, a clipboard in his hand. Just before the door slid shut behind him, Kirk noticed Farrell nodding to the Vulcan operative taking his place, and realised that the two had come to - probably not an agreement, but at least a state of cautious understanding.

"Yes, Mr. Spock."

"Preliminary reports on the planet, Captain. The poison plants we have already encountered seem to be restricted to a relatively small area, the boundaries of which are determined by temperature. There are different hazards in other areas, but nothing that is impossible to deal with."

"I see. What about the rats? Piper said there was the same poison in Mitchell's bite."

"Limited to the area of the plants. So far my conclusions about them are tentative, but I think that they may eat the plants and store the poison in their saliva as a defense mechanism. There are precedents on other planets."

"There are?"

"Yes, Captain - including your Earth. The caterpillars of certain insects feed on plants that are known to be poisonous, and as a result both they and the adult insect are, if not actually poisonous, at least highly distasteful to creatures that would normally prey upon them."

"Oh." Kirk grinned. "The ignorance of a town upbringing, Mr. Spock. My education never included much nature study." *But Sam would have known,* he thought, remembering - as he rarely did - the older brother who had also escaped from Earth by going to Deneva as a research biologist. He dismissed the memory, impatient with his momentary nostalgia - his affection for his brother increased in direct proportion to the distance between them - and returned sharply to business. "Would you recommend the planet for possible colonisation?"

"Only for a farming colony, Captain. There are few minerals in quantities sufficient for mining, and those that are present in quantity are common ones with little commercial value. They will, however, be suitable for exploiting for home use."

Kirk made a face. "The bonus for discovering a planet suitable for a farming colony is a lot less than we'd get for a mining colony one," he grumbled.

"Captain, we cannot discover minerals where there are none," Spock pointed out patiently.

"I know, I know." Kirk sighed and yawned. "Let me have a full report for transmission within twenty-four hours, including your recommendations for dealing with the poison plants and any other dangers that manifested themselves."

"Yes, sir."

"Include Dr. Piper's antidote for the poison. It could be needed by the colonists."

"Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

As the door slid shut behind Spock, Kirk yawned again and stretched. The thought of his bunk was welcome. He had just one last report to draft - though it would take two or three hours - and he could finish it in the morning.

The buzzer sounded again, and he muttered a curse. Was everyone determined to interrupt him today?

"Come." *This had better be good,* he thought.

He had no idea of the identity of the ensign who entered, but as she came to attention before his desk he did take time to register that she was an extremely pretty girl.

"Yes, Ensign?"

"Moreau, sir. I... Rumour has it that you don't have a woman yet, sir. I... " She swallowed. "I am willing to serve you... in that capacity."

Kirk stared at her for several seconds. "But you went to the Booth rather than go to Captain Pike?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Pike was known for his cruelty to his bed partners, sir. I saw how he left some of them. The Booth was preferable."

Jon said as much, Kirk remembered.

"But you, sir - you remembered to cancel Captain Pike's standing order. Some new Captains wouldn't have remembered. And you even gave me time off to let me recover. I'm... not afraid of what you might do to me."

Something about the way she spoke aroused Kirk's suspicions. "Ensign - how experienced are you? In bed, I mean."

She flushed. "Not at all, sir. I've never... "

"I see. What's your name, Ensign?"

"M... Marlena, sir."

"All right, Marlena." Decisively, Kirk stood and held out his hand to her. He felt her trembling as she took it. Clearly she was still unsure, afraid of the decision she had made. "As of now, you're the Captain's Woman. And in token of that, inside these rooms you may call me 'Jim'. Outside them - "

"Yes, sir - Jim. Outside these rooms, you're the Captain and I'm just an Ensign in the laboratory."

Kirk smiled slightly, pleased at her quick understanding. "Then come."

Not giving her time to change her mind, he ushered her into the sleeping area.

Spock's report on the planet was ready in time, which was more than could be said for Kirk's own. Although he rose little later than his accustomed time, he had lost the hours of the evening before and still had to begin work on the report rather than finalise it after sleeping on what he had said. He could not regret the lost hours, however; gratitude might have taken her to his bed, but once there, Moreau - inexperienced though she certainly was - had proved to be most responsive; and although he was still rather sleepy he felt the better for it.

Yes - having a Captain's Woman was definitely one of the better perquisites of his position, he decided. Marlena had returned to her own cabin around midnight, but it would be decidedly better to have her to hand in the mornings as well as the evenings. He would get her to move into the vacant cabin adjoining his after she came off duty.

His decision to retain her as his official mistress positively taken, Kirk settled down to work on the delayed report.

"Message from Starfleet Command, Captain," Uhura reported. "It's scrambled, sir. For your eyes only."

"Relay it to my cabin, Lieutenant. Mr. Spock, you have the conn."

"Aye, sir." The two responses came in exact chorus.

Kirk strode from the Bridge, Farrell a step behind him.

The message might be for the Captain's eyes only, but Kirk took that order less than literally. He motioned Farrell to follow him into his cabin. Once there, Farrell moved silently into the head and pulled the door almost closed.

Kirk flicked the intercom switch on. "Kirk here."

Admiral Komack's face shimmered into view. "Kirk, we have trouble. What do you know of Gorla?"

Kirk thought for a moment. "Nothing, Admiral," he admitted. "I've never heard of the place."

"Didn't think you would. We don't exactly broadcast its existence to the Empire. It's a rich planet, with warlike people - we couldn't defeat them when we first made contact, and they got away with murder when the treaty with them was signed. The Empire gets nothing from them - nothing. They even have a small independent merchant fleet, damn their impudence - we can't even get trade dues from 'em. They recently set up a colony on their sun's fourth planet - basically a mining colony since the temperature is on the low side for agriculture.

"The colonists are now claiming that the treaty between Gorla and the Empire is not binding on them, and they're declaring themselves independent of it. We want you to deal with this rebellion."

Kirk thought for a brief moment. "Have they any weaknesses at all, sir?"

"They are still dependent on Gorla for certain goods, notably food. Other than that..." He shook his head. "They're fighters, Kirk. And they're cunning. They know what's going on in the Empire. They know how you defeated the Vegans. So they're living in the mines. You can't make an example of a lot of them without destroying some of the mines too. And we want the ores they mine."

"What about Gorla itself, sir?"

"It doesn't provide anything that we can't get elsewhere, if that's what you're asking." Komack smiled wolfishly. "Indeed, if you can teach the Gorlans a lesson as well, we won't object."

"Well, Jon?" Kirk glanced towards the head door as the screen blanked out.

Farrell joined him, frowning. "I don't like it, Jim. It has the smell of something nasty - like they're not too happy with the speed you've risen to Captain - aye, I know they were glad to get rid of Pike, but just maybe you did it too quick and efficient-like. Could be they're giving you a real hot plate to carry, hoping you'll drop it."

"I'm... not sure, Jon. Komack was reasonably forthcoming. If he was hoping I'd miss, surely he'd have given me less information."

"Always supposing the info was accurate."

Kirk grinned. "You're a suspicious bastard." But there was an affectionate note in his voice that belied the words.

"Aye," Farrell replied seriously. "And it's saved your skin a couple of times."

"I'm not forgetting that. But... No, Jon. I don't think HQ wants rid of me yet. I'm not nearly ready to step upstairs to a desk, and they know it. So I'm no threat to them in their little cosy offices. Give me another twenty years out here, though - till I'm considered too old to go into space. That's when I'll be a threat to them; that's when they'll start looking for ways to get rid of me."

"Assuming you live that long."

"Oh, I'll live that long," Kirk replied confidently. "I have you to guard my

back, don't I."

"Aye, Jim. You can be sure of that."

"Mr. Chekov - compute course for Gorla."

"Aye, s- " Chekov broke off in mid-word and turned to look at the Captain, a look of fear mixed with the puzzlement on his face. "Gorla, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Chekov - Gorla."

"I... I'm sorry, Captain - I don't know where is this Gorla. I've never heard of it."

"Mr. Chekov," Kirk said with deceptive mildness, "I do not expect my navigator to know every planet in the galaxy by name; I do however expect him to know how to discover the co-ordinates of any planet I might name within a very few seconds.

"Now you might know the planet if I called it - say - Eta Leonis III - which it isn't - but it was called 'Gorla' in the orders I received. And why should I be the one to have to check with the computer to find out where it is? That, Mr. Chekov, is what I have navigational crew for.

"So be warned; I'm prepared to give you a reasonable amount of time to consult the computer if a planet name is new to you - I am *not* prepared to listen to my navigators mumbling lame excuses about never having heard of the place. Do you understand?" No longer mild, his voice had begun to drip icicles.

"Aye, sir. Sorry, sir." Chekov fumbled with the controls on his console.

Having given his warning, Kirk began to count seconds inside his head. He knew exactly how long it had taken him to discover the official designation for the planet; he was prepared to give Chekov exactly that long, plus another ten seconds to compute the course. And then, if the young Russian had not delivered the goods, he was in for a short session in the Booth for inefficiency.

Even flustered, however, Chekov was good. He raised his head, saying, "Course computed and laid in, sir," four seconds inside the time Kirk had mentally allotted.

"Execute." Kirk was secretly impressed at the speed with which Chekov had finally worked, but he was not about to say so. Let the navigator think that he had barely managed to redeem himself on this occasion. Time enough for praise when he had not been reprimanded first.

The Enterprise swung into graceful orbit around Gorla.

Kirk had debated going first to the rebel colony world, then changed his mind. No; first he would approach the home planet and see if the authorities there had anything to say about their erring colonists.

He glanced round. "Uhura - contact the government heads."

"Aye, sir." It took several minutes, but at last she reported, "I have the Chief Magistrate, Captain. His name is Losan."

"Put him on the main viewer."

The face that shimmered into view was that of an elderly - indeed, an old - man. He looked frail - surprisingly frail, considering what Kirk had been told

about the warlike propensities of the Gorlans; pale and tired.

"Kirk, commanding the ISS Enterprise. It has come to our notice that the colonists on your fourth planet are in rebellion against the Empire."

"What they do is nothing to do with us," Losan replied. His voice matched his appearance; it quivered with age. It almost seemed to Kirk that Losan was anxious to curry favour with the representative of the Empire who was in orbit around his planet.

"They are your colonists," he replied coldly.

"They are an independent colony," Losan answered. He sounded nervous.

"There is no such thing an an independent colony in the Empire," Kirk commented. "All Empire worlds are answerable to the Emperor."

A woman moved into view behind Losan carrying a notepad, which she showed to the Gorlan, and Kirk found himself struggling to keep an impassive face; for she, too, looked far too old to be holding down a job - any job, far less one in government.

Losan glanced down at the pad for a moment, then said, "Your pardon, Captain. This will not take long, but something has just been brought to my attention."

Kirk opened his mouth to give a blistering reply, then paused as a thought struck him. "Very well." He waited until Losan's attention had returned to the pad, then glanced at Uhura. "Cut transmission!" he mouthed.

Uhura nodded. "Transmission off, sir. Incoming signal still being received."

"Call Dr. Piper up here at the double."

"Aye, sir."

"Resume contact as soon as Losan is ready," he added.

"Aye, sir."

On the planet, Losan and the woman appeared to be wholly involved in a furious argument; unfortunately they were conducting it in voices too soft for the transmitter to pick up. Kirk watched, fascinated, for he had never before seen such an obviously heated discussion conducted in whispers.

Behind him the turbolift doors swished open, and Piper moved to Kirk's side. "What's wrong, Captain?"

Kirk indicated the viewscreen. "That. Look at them, how old they are. I've never seen anyone that old left in a position of authority. I'm asking myself - why?"

Piper watched the screen for some moments without replying. "Not old, Captain. I think they're ill."

"Ill?"

"Yes... I can't quite put a finger on it, but there's something about the way they're moving... They *look* old, but they're moving - or, more accurately, trying to move - as if they're not used to being old. As if they're used to being able to move briskly... Someone who's old - genuinely old - has stiffened up, lost muscle tone, gradually; has, over the years, adapted, got used to being less able than when they were younger. Those two are still trying to move as if they're quite young - say in their twenties or thirties."

"Interesting," Kirk said thoughtfully.

The muted argument on the planet seemed to have been resolved. Losan looked up. "My apologies, Captain. My colleague here has just brought me some information about our colony on the fourth planet." He hesitated.

"Go on." Kirk's tone discouraged evasion.

Losan still sounded hesitant. Finally, reluctance colouring hs voice, "They have sent word that they wish to pay their taxes to Gorla - not to the Empire."

"I see. And what does Gorla say?"

"Gorla needs the money," he admitted.

"To keep the money would be theft - theft from the Empire," Kirk pointed out. "What does your colleague think?"

"My colleague?"

"Don't play stupid, Losan. The woman who brought you in that report. We couldn't hear what you were saying - but the pair of you were definitely arguing about something."

"Oh." He sighed. "You are right, Captain. We cannot control our colonists, that is true. If they say they will pay their tax money to us, they will do so. She believes that we should pass the money on to the Empire."

"And you don't?"

Losan hesitated again before admitting, "There is illness on Gorla. Our leeches can do nothing. With this money we could hire medical men from other planets... "

"I see." He looked at Piper. "Doctor?"

Piper stepped forward. "My name is Piper. I'm the chief medical officer on the Enterprise," he introduced himself. "What are your symptoms?"

"You see them - at least in part. How old do you think I am?"

"Well... " *At least eighty,* his mind said, *but should I say so? After all, I thought he was probably younger than he looks. And his question does seem to say that there's something wrong with the way he looks.*

"You're wrong." Almost it seemed that Losan had read his mind. "I am not quite thirty. My colleague that you saw - she is three years younger than I am."

"I see." In fact he didn't, for apart from extremely early senility he knew of no condition that would cause such premature aging. "Are there any other symptoms?"

"A susceptibility to disease. Many of our people are not just old but ill as well."

Piper frowned, trying to think of something - anything - in his experience that could cause this. Nothing came immediately to his mind, and he turned to Kirk. "Permission to beam down, sir. I would need to examine one or more of the Gorlans before I could attempt to identify this ailment."

Kirk hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Very well, Doctor." He watched Piper leave the bridge, then turned his attention back to the viewscreen. "How long has this illness affected you?" He was careful to allow no trace of the sympathy he felt to show on his face or in his voice.

"Nearly two years. At first only a few were affected, but the ailment is quite infectious... and, it seems, permanent. Nobody infected has recovered his health, and many have died."

"And how many of your population are infected?"

"Nearly everyone," Losan admitted. "I would say all, but there may be some isolated villages whose inhabitants have not yet come into contact with the disease."

"I see." Kirk swung round to Uhuru, giving her a sign to cut the transmission to the planet.. "Lieutenant, contact the transporter room. Dr. Piper is not to beam down."

"Aye, sir... It's too late, Captain - he's already left the ship."

"Damn!" But it was himself he was damning as well as the doctor and the situation. If this disease was as highly infectious as Losan had finally admitted, he dared not allow Piper to return to the Enterprise. "Resume contact... Losan, Dr. Piper has just left the ship. He will be joining you in a few minutes."

"He will be most welcome."

As they waited for Piper to make his appearance, Kirk continued to push Losan, trying to persuade him that it was in his planet's best interests to give the Empire the tax money from the colonists. He could see that his arguments were beginning to influence the Chief Magistrate when the door behind Losan opened and Piper entered, the woman they had seen before guiding him while at the same time leaning on his arm for support. Barely five minutes had passed since Kirk's fruitless attempt to stop him.

Although elderly and not, by Starfleet standards, particularly fit, his strength and energy were in marked contrast to the lethargy shown by the Gorlans. He helped the woman into a chair, then turned to the man.

"Right, Losan - let's have a look at you."

Kirk watched as Piper ran a scanner over the Gorlan, frowned at the readings, and tried again. Then he glanced round at the woman. "I want to check you, too."

His frown deepened as he took the second set of readings. Then, almost with an effort, he straightened his face.

"Would you leave the room, please - I wish to report my findings to Captain Kirk."

"Can you help us?" Losan asked anxiously.

"Yes," Piper replied quietly. "But I must speak to the Captain in private. Citizens of the Empire - even leading citizens - are not cleared to hear details of the medication necessary for certain ailments." Then, as Losan hesitated, Piper added, "Either you leave now or we do not help you."

He watched as Losan helped the woman from the room; and then, the door safely shut, he ran the scanner over himself and examined the readings. Then he said quietly, "Enterprise."

"Kirk here."

"You must destroy the planet, Captain - immediately. I had believed that this disease was no longer to be found anywhere; how it got here I don't care to think, and I can only pray that the colonists on the fourth planet are unaffected - and that no visitor to Gorla has left carrying the infection."

"As bad as that?" And indeed, it was worse than Kirk had guessed from Losan's words.

"Worse. There was a disease akin to this on Earth some three hundred years ago - they called it Aids. The body lost its ability to fight infection. Back then it was a sexually-transmitted disease which could also be contracted through coming into contact with infected blood. Here... Captain, I'm infected - already. Maybe it's in the air, maybe it was simply through contact with the woman's bare skin. Whatever it was, the speed with which I was infected means that the entire planet is a danger to the galaxy. Even if we quarantined it, some idiot with an eye to the loot they could get from here once everyone is dead would come along raiding... and leave carrying the infection. But nothing can survive exposure to a temperature of absolute zero. So it makes sense to destroy the planet - yes, and me with it."

It was a decision that Kirk had made as soon as he discovered just how widespread the disease actually was, although he would never let his crew know that Piper had just made the decision easier for him. Indeed... Yes - he could certainly turn this to his advantage.

"Captain."

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

"The destruction of this planet will alter the orbits of all the other planets in the system. Not by much, for most of its mass will remain, although in time the fragments will spread to form an asteroid belt; but it will make a slight difference."

"I realise that, Mr. Spock, but we seem to have little alternative. In any case, the only other inhabited planet is the rebel world; where is its current position?"

"It is on the other side of the sun."

"Just about as far distant as it could be, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case, the disturbance there should not be too catastrophically sudden, should it?"

"No, sir."

"And even if it was - the inhabitants are rebels who are defying the Empire. It will do no harm to remind them of the Empire's power.

"Mr. Sulu - prepare photon torpedoes one through six. Two minutes, Doctor."

"Thank you, Captain." Then, after a moment, "Captain - I have a daughter on Earth. She is to get my things... please."

"Very well, Doctor - I'll see that she gets them." And that, he decided, was a promise he did intend to keep, if he had to pay the Emperor's coffers the value of Piper's estate himself. "Anything else?"

"No. Good luck, Enterprise."

Kirk turned to Uhuru. "Cut contact."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Chekov, take us out of orbit as soon as the torpedoes are fired. As direct a course as possible for the fourth planet. Mr. Sulu - fire torpedoes." *And if Chekov breaks orbit before all six are fired, he'll get a solid week in the Booth!* Kirk promised himself.

Chekov, however, appeared to have learned his lesson. He lost no time once the sixth torpedo was fired, but he did not

leave orbit prematurely. The Enterprise was grazing the orbit of the innermost planet as she passed the sun when behind them Gorla exploded into a giant ball of incandescent gas.

The huge Starship slid into orbit around the rebel colony and circled it several times while Spock took readings.

"The planet is beginning to move outwards from the sun," he reported at last. "The movement is minimal as yet, but detectable with our instruments. It will probably spiral out for several hundred miles before settling into a new, permanent orbit."

"How long will that take?"

"Difficult to compute without more data on the system, Captain, but it will certainly take several years - possibly a century or even more. A solar system is a complex relationship of gases and solids, and, as I said, we must remember that although the planet of Gorla is no longer there, its mass is, and will take some time to spread."

"Right. Uhuru - get me the planet."

"Aye, sir."

It took some time before the planet acknowledged their presence, and Kirk was fast losing patience when at last they received an answer.

"Morda, Secretary of the Independent Colony of Gorlanna. We want nothing from the Empire." His voice dripped with self-importance.

"You may want nothing from the Empire," Kirk told him with the deceptive quietness that his crew had already learned to fear. "But the Empire wants your taxes. The Empire does not accept your so-called independence."

"Our home planet has accepted it."

Kirk smiled - the cold, calculating smile of a predator seeing its prey moving into reach. "Your home planet no longer exists."

"Ridiculous!"

"I suggest that you try to make contact with it. You do have a method of contacting the Gorlan rulers?" he asking, mockery in his voice.

He watched silently as Morda turned to a radio transmitter, and waited patiently as the rebel struggled to get any answer other than static. Finally Morda turned back to him.

"Gorla is badly situated now, on the other side of the sun... " he said weakly.

"Gorla has been destroyed," Kirk said, "because Losan refused to co-operate with us. Do you want to share that fate?"

Morda stared at him, desperately trying to disbelieve him, but the cold certainty in Kirk's face had already convinced him. "I must consult my Council," he said weakly, and it was clear that he was searching for a way to surrender without losing face.

"You have an hour," Kirk told him, and gestured to Uhura to cut contact.

The rebels submitted, of course, withdrawing their secession without further argument. Kirk pretended to doubt their sincerity until in desperation they offered him what could only be called a bribe of fifty thousand credits.

He still feigned reluctance, giving them the impression that he would prefer to destroy their planet as well as their home planet, and only accepted their surrender when they increased their offer to sixty thousand - having assessed quite accurately the amount they could raise literally overnight.

The credits - good Empire issue - were indeed ready first thing the next morning. Kirk was not completely ready to trust the colonists - he knew how easy it would be to plant an explosive device in the box with the money. So he sent down a shuttlecraft that contained only a pilot and Security Chief Sulu, with orders to examine the box of money before they returned to the ship and make sure it contained nothing but money; in addition, they were to transfer that money to another box and jettison the one supplied by the erstwhile rebels. Not that he particularly trusted Sulu, but it was going to be impossible for him to cheat; a shuttlecraft could never outdistance a Starship even if he was minded to run for it, and Kirk had every intention of counting the money himself once it was delivered to him.

The colonists did not try any tricks. Neither did Sulu attempt to pocket any of the money.

Kirk, with Spock's assistance, divided up the money in accordance with the percentages that Spock had already worked out, then he called in the department heads to issue the money to the crew. Piper's share was carefully laid aside to be delivered in due course to his daughter.

Kirk's report to Komack gave the precise facts and the real reason for the destruction of Gorla, and added his recommendation that since Piper had given his life in Starfleet's service, his daughter should be permitted to inherit her father's property without penalty; but he suggested to the Admiral that it might be advantageous to leave the public believing that Gorla - a planet of little importance in the Empire - was destroyed in order to teach a lesson to the more valuable colony.

Komack agreed to both suggestions. It did no harm to let the more discontented planets in the Empire know that Starfleet's Captains were ready and willing to take extreme action to keep the Empire intact.

Further, he promised Kirk a replacement doctor as soon as the Enterprise returned to Starbase 8.

Kirk stretched wearily before he sank into his seat behind the desk. As he also sat, Farrell watched him sympathetically; for he knew - who better? - how little his employer enjoyed using force to accomplish anything.

"It was the only humane thing to do," he said quietly.

"I know, Jon. I know. I can accept that. It's Piper I'm thinking about. The waste... He was a good doctor."

"Is there such a thing?" Farrell asked cynically.

"Well... the best we have," Kirk conceded. "You know how many so-called doctors are sadists pure and simple. He was never that."

"No, he was never that. What do you think his replacement will be like?"

"Who knows? But we'll be lucky if he's half as good."

The buzzer sounded, and Farrell stood in an automatic response as Kirk called, "Come."

It was Spock. He glanced at the Human guard, who was turning to leave without waiting to be told, then at the Captain, half expecting him to call Farrell to order. When Kirk said nothing, Spock realised fully just how accurate Solan had been when he suggested that Kirk's personal guard had a great deal of autonomy.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" Kirk spoke before the door was fully shut.

"I have the final figures for the change in Gorlanna's orbit," the Vulcan reported. "It will continue to spiral out from its primary for some twenty-eight years. The average temperature on the planet will diminish by some two degrees over that time - it could be enough to start an ice age, but the planet is not so over-populated that this will be any great hardship; the inhabitants will simply have to move nearer to the tropical zone, such as it is, except where miners can make their homes underground."

"Which will have to be pretty well everywhere - I understand that the climate is quite cool already."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk shook his head. "A pity," he commented. "It will handicap the mining quite considerably."

"True - but the Gorlanna colonists should have considered the possibility of reprisals before they rebelled."

"I doubt that the miners in general had much to do with the decision to rebel," Kirk said. "That sort of decision is usually a political one. The public don't know anything about it until it's too late for them to object - always supposing they want to."

An eyebrow lifted. "On Vulcan, no major decision is ever taken without the knowledge of the public."

"Because you are a telepathic race?"

"It is possible," Spock admitted. "Certainly we would know if something was being kept from us. We might not know what it was; but we would know that there was something being kept secret, and - if our leaders were unsure of the popularity of the move - we would know that it was an uneasy secret, not simply something being kept from us because as a race we did not need to know. For example, our leaders might not tell us - as a race - that an irrigation project was planned for a certain area; for only those living in the area would need to know. Everyone else would know only that an area project was under way. We would not need to know where, or how much it would cost, nor indeed would we be interested."

"In other words, Vulcans don't gossip?"

"Correct, Captain. The Human obsession with other people's affairs never ceases to amaze me."

"I can't say I'm all that interested in what others are doing either," Kirk admitted. "But it helps to keep an ear to the ground. That way, I know who not to trust. Do you play chess?"

Spock stared for a moment, taken slightly aback by the abrupt change of subject. "Yes, Captain. I usually play against the computer; none of the crew can give me a reasonable match."

"Not even the other Vulcans on board?"

"No, sir; not even them." In actual fact, Solan was a very competent player; but as feudal superior, although Spock might give his trusted serfs considerable freedom of movement, he would not - could not, without losing their respect - challenge them to a game of skill where they might win. Certainly they might deem it wise to lose to him, but that was no form of contest. If he lost, Spock wanted to lose on the merit of his opponent.

"Well, I was champion in the Academy chess club in my second and third years there. I'm short of a good opponent myself - Farrell can play, but he's got no imagination; he's a steady, cautious player who might get through the first round of a contest but would certainly be knocked out in the second round. Care to try a game or two with me? If we find we can't match each other there's no harm done; if we do, we've both found a chess partner."

"Yes. Thank you, Captain. Tonight?"

"That'd be fine." Kirk glanced at the Vulcan, nearly trusting him but not quite. "Rec room two, 19.00?"

"Yes, sir."

The Doctor waiting to join them at Starbase 8 was Human, and a little younger than Kirk had expected. Most younger Human Doctors were conscripted to work in the hospitals of over-crowded Earth until the Empire considered they had paid back the cost of training them - usually a minimum of ten years; and then most were directed into service as general practitioners for another ten before they were free to specialise, but Dr. McCoy was barely forty. It was not until much later that Kirk discovered a) McCoy's family was very influential, and rich enough to have paid for his training without appealing to the Empire for a grant; b) he had specialised in xenomedicine, thus practically ensuring for himself an eventual career in Starfleet; and c) he had married the Surgeon-General's daughter, thus positively ensuring for himself a career in Starfleet.

McCoy had indeed worked in hospitals for some ten years, but since then he had been on his father-in-law's staff at Starfleet HQ; and he would have remained there, had his wife not died - murdered, along with several others, as they walked down the street; their killer a drug-crazed youngster with a knife whose hallucinations saw them as a threat. He had been overpowered within minutes, but during those minutes he had used his knife to deadly effect; eight people died and three more were seriously injured.

Although the cynics had believed the marriage to be one of convenience on McCoy's part it had been a real love match on both sides, and in the months following the funeral the bereaved McCoy found that he could not bear to remain on Earth with his memories. His dead wife's parents were happy to take charge of their granddaughter, and his father-in-law arranged that he would get the first Starship vacancy available.

It was - as he came to realise - his good luck that that ship was the Enterprise.

Kirk welcomed him aboard, brisk and businesslike, and McCoy in turn welcomed the Captain's impersonal greeting. He knew that wise Captains liked to be on reasonably friendly terms with their Chief Medical Officers, but he

was disinclined to be sociable.

He had, of course, been informed of the reason why the Enterprise needed a new CMO, and suspected that Kirk himself was possibly licking a few emotional wounds.

As he greeted his new superior officer he was careful to watch the other members of the reception party. The First Officer was a Vulcan. Well, he wasn't bigoted; if he was, he wouldn't have specialised in xenomedicine! But the expressionless bearded face studying him told him that this Vulcan had no trust in Human Doctors.

But then, perhaps he had cause.

Behind the Captain and First Officer stood the commanders of their personal guard. The Human guard was a burly man who looked as if he could break someone's arm just by shaking his hand; but McCoy knew that the Vulcan, although he looked slighter, would be the more deadly. The two guards, somewhat to McCoy's surprise, were not eyeing each other suspiciously, and he filed that piece of information away to be considered later.

He chose to go straight to sickbay rather than to his cabin, as he might have been expected to do; he wanted to assess his staff and knew that this was the best way to catch them unaware.

As it happened, he was pleasantly surprised; although there had been no CMO on board for several days, and although here at the Starbase sickbay was quiet, the members of staff who were on duty were keeping busy; two orderlies were washing down the floor and two nurses were checking over equipment. He discovered instantly why this group was so conscientious; one of the orderlies looked up as the door opened, and the older nurse, who had seemed to be intent on her work, snapped, "Back to work, Mister!"

Ah - this had to be his head nurse, and a good, efficient one she was too. He ignored the orderlies - time to speak to them after he had given the senior nurse her place - and walked briskly over to her.

"Dr. McCoy," he introduced himself.

She looked at him for a moment, as if assessing him. "Nurse Chapel."

"You're senior nurse?"

"Yes, Doctor."

He nodded. "You're doing a good job, Nurse. What's the rest of the medical staff like?"

She frowned slightly. "Not too bad. Dr. Piper got rid of a couple of total incompetents who had somehow managed to slip past Fleet screening procedures, but we still have two or three who need to be watched to make sure they do their work properly." She nodded to the man she had called to order. "Sarsen there is one of them."

McCoy noted the dirty look the man flashed at Chapel. He clearly resented the criticism - to say nothing of the simple fact that, whether justified or not, she had warned the new CMO about him.

Well, McCoy preferred to assess his staff himself; personality clashes did occur and a reasonably good worker could get a bad reputation from a superior who disliked him, but a warning from a clearly competent chief nurse was not to be ignored - and the man *had* looked up from his work. Certainly it was natural for the man to be curious about the new CMO, but in Starfleet

curiosity was not encouraged.

Meanwhile, it was in his own interests to be on as good terms as possible with his chief nurse. "I see." He moved over and stood looking down at Sarsen, who, only too well aware of his scrutiny, applied himself diligently to his work.

Then he glanced back at Chapel. "You're doing an *excellent* job, Nurse. Carry on." He turned and strode away.

The Enterprise swung into orbit around Xi Geminorum IV, a planet whose sun was just outside Empire space, drawn to it by power readings that had been detected by long-range scanners.

"Report, Mr. Spock." Kirk was curious; why had this planet not been contacted before? It was close enough...

"Standard M-class planet... well industrialised... little sign of increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere... Captain - it seems that this race's initial industrialisation discovered or developed a form of energy that does not pollute or damage the atmosphere in any way."

"Is that possible?" Although Earth had finally accepted nuclear power, once fusion rather than fission had proved to be the answer for a power-hungry world, Kirk could remember from his history lessons the pictures of smoke-shrouded cities, and from his science lessons the narrow escape from overheating the planet had experienced as for many years industry poured excess carbon dioxide into the air, creating a "greenhouse effect". The warning had come in plenty of time, but action had been taken barely in time; the ice-caps had already begun to melt and several low-lying parts of the world had been inundated before the world government set up by Khan Noonian Singh (once he had disposed of all his genetically improved rivals) acted to prevent any further damage to the atmosphere. The resulting hardship for most of the world's population - until nuclear fusion plants were developed - caused riots and revolts which were ruthlessly suppressed by Khan's troops and halved the world's population inside ten years.

History now recognised that Khan - the first Emperor of Earth - had had little choice but to act as he did, but at the time he was probably the most hated ruler the Earth had ever seen. His methods had worked; and were continued by his son, Noonian II. The needs of the people were seen as unimportant compared to the needs of the planet. And Earth was further cushioned against industrial pollution by the development of space flight. Uninhabited worlds were colonised and mined for the ores that Earth needed; inhabited worlds were annexed and the less advanced ones were also mined or used as giant factories to provide Earth with manufactured goods. The more advanced worlds - like Vulcan - were treated more circumspectly, the leaders being shown the advantages to them of the sort of life the Terran rulers lived. But they were little more than puppets, their strings pulled by the Emperor and his favourites.

Spock's voice recalled Kirk's attention to the present.

"Indeed it is. Electric power springs immediately to mind. It does no damage to the atmosphere, no matter what it might do to objects on the surface of a planet - electricity is a natural force. Fuels used in generating it could pollute the atmosphere, but if natural forces are used - wind power or water power - there is no pollution." He bent over his scanner again. "I think this planet may use both

wind and water power as well as the electricity generated by them."

"Yes, Mr. Spock - I realise that electricity itself is a very clean form of power - but is it possible for a planet to develop electric power without first using - say - fossil fuels?"

"It could be possible if the planet had no fossil fuel deposits readily accessible," Spock replied. "However... scanners indicate that a war is in progress. Weapons appear to be primitive; focusing on a battlefield now."

The viewscreen shimmered and settled into a picture of mail-clad fighters embroiled in hand to hand combat. Swords and spears were being wielded enthusiastically; blood was everywhere.

"With pollution-free power sources, they still fight like that?" Kirk asked blankly.

"It could be deliberate," Spock replied thoughtfully. "Vulcan continued the use of traditional weapons in warfare long after we had learned the secrets of explosives. It never occurred to my ancestors to use explosives for anything other than mining. And they were far more warlike than the Humans of Earth's past."

Kirk shook his head in wonderment, but his eyes were already narrowing as he considered the possibilities. If he could help one side to defeat the other, it would put the Empire in a very strong position... but which side to support?

"Lt. Uhura - can you pick up any signals that might tell us something about the situation down there?"

"Yes, sir; there are old-style radio waves radiating out from the planet almost faster than I can pick them up."

"Right - let's hear some of them."

It took a little while before the translator began to make sense out of the languages - there were two, with a number of regional variations whose resemblance to the 'standard' languages defeated the translator, which was unable to detect a variant as a possibly separate language - but an hour later they were a little wiser. The war appeared to be between the northern and southern hemispheres of Tantalla, ideological in origin, and with both sides pretty evenly matched.

"All right," Kirk said at last. "Can anyone make out the political systems involved?"

"It sounds to me more religious than political, sir," Uhura commented.

"Two religions?"

"No, sir - two versions of the same religion."

Kirk raised his eyes heavenwards. "Much ado about very little," he commented sourly. Then he shrugged. *I doubt it matters very much which side we support... yes, though, it does!* "Uhura - from these broadcasts, can you make out which side is losing?"

"Yes, sir - the northern hemisphere."

"Right. We'll target them. When we beam down, they'll probably think we're emissaries of their god come to help them. Then, when we've turned their defeat into victory, they'll be ready to eat out of our hands. Mr. Spock - can you pinpoint their capital?"

"Yes, sir - co-ordinates being fed to the transporter room now."

"Excellent. You'll beam down with me. Farrell - I want half a dozen security guards. You can include at least one of Mr. Spock's men. They are to meet us in the transporter room in five minutes. Mr. Scott - you have the conn."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk was quickly proved right. Their arrival on Tantalla was greeted with initial fear and then exuberance. A few palmed hand phasers gave the impression (on both sides) that a pointed finger was all that was needed to strike down an opponent; the southern leaders quickly surrendered.

By then, Kirk had learned that each side had been experimenting with new, improved weapons. The northern region had been developing bows and arrows, but had hesitated to use anything so unsporting as a weapon that would kill from a distance. They did not know what kind of weapon was being developed in the south.

Kirk studied the prototype weapon. The scientists had somehow managed to bypass the simple bow, and had instead gone for a crossbow type of weapon. It looked effective and a demonstration showed that it was effective.

In his role as messenger of the god, Kirk expressed disapproval and praised their decision not to use the weapon even when they were losing, then watched solemnly as the prototype models and all the paperwork concerning the weapon were destroyed - he wanted the Tantallans to be relatively helpless when they finally realised that they had been tricked. And to ensure that they would be helpless, he arranged for the scientists who had developed the weapon to be disposed of - quietly and efficiently.

He then demanded to be taken to the scientific headquarters of the southern lands. Only Farrell accompanied him; although he invited Spock along, he did not insist when the Vulcan declined, saying that if the one side did not have anything more advanced than a crossbow, the other was unlikely to have anything better and it would be a waste of his time studying that if he could put that time to better use studying the natives' power sources.

When he reached the laboratories, Kirk was glad that he had not insisted on Spock's company.

The chief scientist of the southern army, realising that he had no alternative, showed the alien warrior the weapon on which he had been working; and this one was a technological miracle. Kirk watched, slightly awed, as the 'mirror' of the device was focused onto a laboratory animal in another room, a button was pressed, and the creature vanished. It was not unlike the operation of the phaser, but had the added advantage that it could strike unseen from a distance.

"How many people know about this?" Kirk asked sternly.

"Nobody. I worked on it alone." The scientist was dignified and matter-of-fact, where the northern scientists had babbled ingratiatingly, and Kirk found himself regretting that the man would have to die. Damned if he didn't prefer the natives of the south! But the northern ones would be by far the easier to cow and keep cowed.

"And you hadn't put it into use yet against your enemy?"

"No. This is still a prototype. It needs a little refinement."

"In what way?"

"It kills. I did not want to offer it to my leaders until it was developed so that it would only stun, and let us take prisoners."

"I see." Kirk glanced at his henchman. "Show me exactly how it works."

Between them, Kirk and Farrell managed to install the device - which Kirk, remembering that the natives called their planet Tantalla, mentally called the Tantalus Field - in Kirk's cabin without anyone being any the wiser. Its inventor was dead, his body vaporised; if he was missed, nobody would know where he had gone.

For some moments Kirk wondered if he should confide in Spock; the Vulcan's scientific expertise might be useful in establishing just how effective the Field was. But years of trusting nobody but Farrell told. He would keep this piece of knowledge to himself - at least for the time being.

As it happened, "the time being" was quite short, and the person who discovered the existence of the Field was not the Vulcan. Kirk had, in a rare moment of absent-mindedness, forgotten that Marlena, his official Woman, now occupied the adjoining cabin, and within twenty- four hours she had learned about the Field by the simple chance of coming through that adjoining door while Kirk was experimenting with the possibilities the Field offered him of spying on those of his officers he did not trust.

He was not best pleased, but managed to hide the fact, admitting to himself that he should have made sure that the connecting door was locked; and he had discovered that whatever her faults might be, Marlena was discreet... and loyal. So he made the best of what he considered to be a bad job, realising that it could be useful to have her available to monitor the Field while he and Farrell were occupied elsewhere. Not that she would be permitted to shirk her work in the Chem Lab - he had no intention of providing ammunition for the almost obligatory accusation, heard on every ship - and often true - that the Captain's Woman got away with murder. It would be said, of course, but as long as she worked her regular shifts efficiently Starfleet Command would shrug off the accusation as the jealous gossip of female crew who had not caught the Captain's eye.

It was Marlena who, while practising with the controls, came on a plot to kill the Captain, less than a week after the Field was installed. She lost no time in contacting Kirk, who, having checked for himself, used the Field to dispose of Lieutenants Gaur and Ytria.

Their disappearance was a complete mystery to Security; a mystery that Kirk had no intention of solving. He also took the opportunity offered to lean somewhat on Lt. Sulu who, with Pike gone, was, Kirk felt, getting just a little too cocky for his own good.

Gaur and Ytria were the first of several disappearances among the more ambitious of the crew, and word soon travelled round the ship that those who sought to displace the Captain were no longer safe as long as they trod carefully and plotted only in cautious private. For it was quickly realised that the mysterious disappearances were of Kirk's

enemies... and only Kirk's enemies.

The landing party looked round cautiously. Although certain of the readings had been ambiguous, one part of the planet - and only one part - had read sparsely inhabited, with a fairly primitive level of culture; the sort of level where a display of superior technology might be taken as magic. The natives might however react with effective but futile violence - futile, for they would inevitably be defeated; but at the same time, effective enough to kill. Since there was no way of knowing which way the natives would jump, the landing party remained cautious.

Spock studied his tricorder, slowly turning in a circle. Finally he raised his head and looked directly at Kirk. "We are being watched, Captain." His voice was hardly more than a breath. "One person - behind me, one hundred and four degrees; some twenty yards from us."

"Farrell." Kirk's voice was equally soft, and he spoke without moving his lips - a skill that had served him well on more occasions than he cared to think. "Get behind him. I'll distract him."

"Aye, sir." Farrell checked his tricorder with ostentatious deliberation, swung round and moved off at an angle that at first sight would take him nowhere near the position indicated by the First Officer. He paused beside a bush, apparently taking readings.

As he brushed sweat from his forehead - the result of a too-hot sun shining from a cloudless sky - Kirk appeared to be paying him no attention, but he was aware of the moment when Farrell stopped. His voice unnaturally loud, he said, "Report, Mr. Spock."

"Nothing of particular interest, Captain." Spock, too, spoke far louder than necessary.

"'Nothing of particular interest', Mister? What sort of report is that?" Kirk snarled. "I'm the one who'll decide whether anything is of particular interest, not you!"

"Captain, as Science Officer it is my considered opinion that there is nothing on this planet to interest us."

"What about a hundred miles from here?" Kirk snarled. "We need to investigate more, dammit! And if you can't do a competent job as Science Officer we'll see if someone else can."

"There is nobody on the ship more qualified to be Science Officer - " Spock broke off as a muffled cry came from behind him. He whirled, falling into step with Kirk as the Captain took a few steps forward.

They were met by Farrell, frogmarching a native towards him.

Kirk studied the alien thoughtfully. He was of average height, with hair so fair that it was almost white; and the tips of two antennae showed through it. He was wearing a brightly coloured sarong. His skin was a brownish colour; at first sight, Kirk could not decide whether he was naturally brown-skinned or if he was white-skinned and sunburned. Not that it mattered.

"Any trouble?" he asked casually.

"No, sir. He seems to be a complete pacifist. Gave up without a struggle; nearly burst into tears when he realised he'd been spotted."

"I see." Kirk took a deep breath. Somehow he had to communicate with

this alien, and conversing with a newly-discovered species was never easy, especially at first. The universal translator, while normally highly efficient, was useless until it had had the opportunity to 'hear' and assess a fair amount of the alien language; and it was a given that the first words any native would say in response to a question were 'I don't understand'.

It was simpler to watch a group of natives from hiding, let the translator hear them talking together to give it a grounding in the language, then capture one to question.

The alien tilted his head slightly; almost as if he was listening to someone talking. Then he looked at Kirk, new confidence in his eyes.

"You are welcome, stranger. I am Akuta, the voice of Vaal."

Even Spock's eyebrows lifted in surprise, for the man spoke perfect standard. Kirk stiffened. "Vaal? Who is Vaal?"

"Vaal rules this world. He makes the rain fall and the crops grow."

This Akuta is a high priest, then, Kirk thought. *Damn. Priests I can do without. They're either totally corrupt and even more treacherous than the Emperor's minions or they're too willing to die for the integrity of their beliefs.* He was not sure which possibility he disliked more.

"Vaal may agree to see you," Akuta continued, "and speak directly to you; but it is more likely that he will make his wishes known to me, and expect you to deal through me."

Kirk glanced at Spock, noting that the Vulcan's eyebrows were on the lift and interpreting the gesture as an indication of surprise. He was surprised himself; Akuta's words indicated that this Vaal actually lived on the surface of the planet.

Wait, though... just wait, Kirk thought. *A 'god' doesn't have to be an incorporeal supersitition. Any good con man could land on a primitive planet and set himself up as a god. Yes... that could very well be the answer. Wonder where he came from?*

"Take us to Vaal," he ordered. Any good con man would quickly see the advantage to himself of co-operating with the Empire. So what if Akuta and his tribe - primitives all - found their lives being thoroughly screwed up between their 'god' and the Empire? They deserved it for being so naive!

His own eyebrows lifted, however, at his first sight of the building to which Akuta led them.

They had passed a small village on the way; a village of simple, circular huts constructed of straw and leaves built over a framework of branches; there were no windows, and a strip of cloth in the same bright colours as the sarongs the natives wore was hung inside the entrance to serve as a door. Two or three women sat outside their houses weaving grass into baskets - wide, fairly flat baskets that didn't look strong enough to hold much.

The impression given by the village was of a very early stage of settled development; if pushed, Kirk would have estimated that the natives were just hovering on the verge of abandoning a hunter-gatherer existence in favour of settled farming - except that none of the ground around the village showed any sign of tillage.

But that impression was instantly destroyed at first sight of the temple of Vaal.

It seemed to be carved out of the solid rock of the hillside, and what could only be called the doorway was shaped like an enormous mouth bristling with fangs. Behind the doorway was a tunnel, disappearing downwards like an enormous throat. A wisp of something - smoke or steam - rose from it, quickly dissipating once it reached the open air.

How could primitives like these have built such an impressive-looking, carved stone structure? Where had they found the technology to make the flashing 'eyes' that seemed to glare at them from above the gaping 'mouth'?

Aware of the surprise the rest of the landing party must be experiencing, Kirk glanced at Akuta, silently daring the alien to look triumphant at this show of technology. Akuta, however, seemed oblivious of the startled reaction of the visitors. A moment's reflection was enough to let Kirk understand why. Akuta was so used to the appearance of his god that he was totally unaware of how impressive it might seem to someone seeing it for the first time. And it *was* impressive, Kirk silently admitted to himself. At least, it was impressive here, in this primitive setting. It would be far less so if it was sited in - say - the Emperor's summer capital of Bai-jong.

The native stepped forward confidently. "These strangers wish to speak with you," he said.

Kirk glanced at him, momentarily startled by the utter informality of the statement. He would have expected a high priest to kneel; or bow, at least; yet Akuta did neither. He would have expected formal language, with the god addressed as "Lord"; yet Akuta addressed his god in language as simple as he would have used to one of the other natives.

There was a moment of silence; and then a deep voice boomed out, apparently coming from the depths of the smoking throat.

"If they come in peace they are welcome. Give them food and see to their needs." There was no expression in the voice; it could have been the mechanical voice of a computer.

Kirk stepped forward. "You are Vaal?" he asked. Unwilling awe at the technology needed to built this structure kept his voice politely even.

"I am Vaal."

"Do you rule this world?"

"Rule?" The expressionless voice seemed for a moment to sound almost puzzled. "My people feed me. In exchange I make the rain fall and I ripen the fruit. We are partners, each with our own responsibilities."

"Then who speaks for your world? With whom can I discuss terms to allow your world to join our Empire?"

"We are not interested in joining your Empire."

"How can you say that before you know what we can offer you?" If Kirk felt awkward talking to a building he gave no indication of it.

"We have all that we need," Vaal replied. "My people feed me; I feed them. We need nothing more."

"Perhaps *you* don't," Kirk exclaimed, shivering as a sudden cloud covered the sun. "But what of the people? Are they satisfied? Do they really have all they need?"

There was no reply.

"Vaal has gone," Akuta told him quietly.

Kirk swung round to face him. "Then you tell me. Do you really have all you need? All you want?"

"What would we do with more?" Akuta asked.

Kirk stared at him for a moment, speechless, then yanked his communicator from his belt. "Kirk to Enterprise."

There was no reply; only the crackle of static. Kirk glanced upwards, and his eyes opened wide at sight of the black clouds covering the sky that only five minutes earlier had been blue. Lightning sparked from cloud to cloud, followed barely a second later by a long rumble of thunder. It was clear that until the storm had blown past, they were effectively cut off from the Enterprise.

Weather; the one thing that the Empire could not control.

"Come," Akuta said. "You may shelter in our village."

The hut they were given had clearly been vacated by one of the villagers: a half woven basket lay forgotten against one wall, a pile of dried grasses beside it. Obviously intended as seats, several cushions lay around a low table, its surface made of grasses woven so tightly that it was perfectly horizontal, the wooden frame lashed together by some kind of fibre. A hand-carved wooden bowl containing fruit stood on it.

The various members of the landing party looked round the hut in the dim light from the doorway - except Kirk, who remained standing at the door, glaring out at the lashing rain. The natives had all disappeared into their own huts, driven there by the downpour; even Akuta, having shown them to this one, had made his hasty way to another hut.

Spock, the only member of the landing party senior enough to sit without waiting for permission from the Captain, sank cross-legged onto one of the cushions and studied the table and the bowl on it thoughtfully. "These people are not so primitive as they would have us think," he commented. "This is highly skilled work."

Kirk turned impatiently from the doorway and glared at his men, hovering uncertainly around the table. "Oh, sit down, sit down."

As they obeyed, Spock aimed his tricorder at the fruit. "It is all edible," he commented.

Kirk threw himself down onto one of the cushions and took a dark purple fruit. He looked at it almost suspiciously for a moment, then bit into it. Purple-blue juice ran down his chin and he wiped his face with the back of his hand; but the fruit - whatever it was - was good, and he took another, more cautious, bite, this time managing to avoid being covered with juice.

"All right, Mr. Spock," he said. "Any comments on this culture? And on Vaal. What is it?"

Spock frowned. "Vaal appears to be some form of highly sophisticated computer. However, who was responsible for building it remains a mystery. The people here certainly did not; and we detected nothing to indicate the presence anywhere on the planet of the ruins of an advanced, but now lost, culture such as can be found on Cappa Leonis III or - "

"We are discussing *here*, Mr. Spock, not Cappa Leonis III or any other such world." Under other circumstances - say during a long boring uneventful flight between worlds - Kirk might be willing to discuss the lost civilisations of the Galaxy for the sake of something to occupy his mind, but - more single-minded than Spock often appeared to be - he refused to be sidetracked onto the other subject while the problem of here and now remained to be solved.

"It seems most probable that the computer was built by visitors to this planet," Spock said slowly.

Kirk nodded. It was his conclusion also. However, it did not answer the question of why. *Why* had visitors to the planet built such a computer?

"Captain... " Yeoman Langdon's voice was apologetic, but there was also a note in it that caught Kirk's attention.

"Well, Yeoman?"

"Captain... we saw several men in the village, and a few women - but where were the children?"

Kirk looked at her, his mind racing. "Kept out of sight of the strangers?"

"The women didn't seem concerned," she said, more confidently now that Kirk had accepted her comment as a valid one. "They just sat there getting on with their work. If they were worried enough to chase their children out of sight of the strangers, logically they would have hidden too."

"She's right, Captain," Spock said. "Besides, when was there time for them to find out about us? Before we walked through the village on our way to see Vaal, there was no chance for Akuta to have let the other people know about the presence of strangers."

"Unless they're telepathic," Kirk growled.

Spock shook his head. "I saw nothing to indicate that they might be."

Kirk scrambled to his feet and went back to the doorway. He pulled aside the cloth 'door' and gazed outside at the rain. It was still falling steadily, although not as heavily. Somewhere in the distance thunder rumbled, faintly but with a strangely threatening timbre. He looked up at the clouds, wondering how long it would take the storm to blow over so that he could contact his ship.

He swung round abruptly. "All right, Mr. Spock. Let's think about these possible visitors. What advantage would it give them to leave a computer here? Its sole purpose seems to be to control the weather and 'make the crops grow'. O.K., I can see the advantage that would be to the natives. On the face of it, it would be a great asset on almost any planet with marginal living conditions. Yet... I don't know. Something about it makes me uneasy. What was it really left here for?"

A bell sounded outside. Kirk crossed back to the doorway and looked out, Spock close behind him. Despite the rain - now little more than a soft drizzle - the natives were leaving their huts.

They were all carrying the woven baskets that the visitors had seen being made. They made their way to a pile of rocks and in turn, each one filled his or her basket with rock, lifted it onto head or shoulder and then, unhurriedly and gracefully, made their way in the direction of Vaal.

Kirk glanced at his First Officer. "Spock - and you, Farrell - come on. The rest of you - stay here."

Solan took a half step forward; Spock raised his hand slightly and, after a glance at Farrell, who nodded imperceptibly, Solan stepped back. The three men followed the last of the thirty or so natives and stopped when they came in sight of the impressive dragon face of the computer. They watched as the natives lined up unhurriedly and very informally. Akuta moved to the head of the line and with a total lack of ceremony, tossed the rocks in his basket into the dragon's 'mouth'. He put down his basket and waited. The next native moved forward, handed his basket to Akuta, took the empty one and moved away. Akuta tossed its contents into the mouth, put the basket down and turned to receive the next one.

Eventually the computer had received the contents of thirty-four baskets. The natives, as they handed over their baskets, drifted away, talking together, laughing, in obvious high spirits. Akuta stood for a moment after he had tossed in the last basketful of rock, almost as if he was waiting for some sort of communication, then he too moved away.

Kirk and Spock looked at each other.

"That's what was meant by 'My people feed me'," Spock said slowly.

"All right. Those rocks somehow power the computer. I still don't see the rationale behind all this."

"I must admit, neither do I," Spock confessed. "The whole set-up seems totally illogical. It seems to exist only to perpetuate itself. The natives feed Vaal, Vaal 'causes the crops to grow' to feed the natives, whose sole purpose in life seems to be to feed Vaal... "

Kirk shrugged, a 'god knows' gesture and turned back towards the village. "I want another word with Akuta."

Cornered, Akuta seemed willing enough to talk. Yes, this was the only village - what need was there of more? Yes, there were only thirty-four people in the village. That was as many as it needed to provide Vaal with food. Children? What were children?

Kirk, Spock and Farrell rejoined the rest of the landing party with answers that told them nothing. Kirk flipped open his communicator and the crackle of static that emerged from it told him that the electrical disturbance, while it might have moved away from the village, was still disrupting the airwaves.

"I don't like this," he growled.

A movement at the door interrupted him, and he swung round. Three of the natives - two men and a woman - entered carrying baskets of food. Akuta followed them in.

"Vaal has instructed that you be fed and given shelter for the night," he said quietly and the three bearers put the baskets down on the table. "It will soon be dark."

Kirk nodded. "Thank you," he said, a trifle grimly. There was no point in losing his temper with Akuta, he realised; Akuta sounded as if he had the mentality of a fairly intelligent two-year-old, and was simply repeating Vaal's words. The four natives left again, as casually as they had left Vaal's presence, and Kirk nodded to the table.

"We might as well eat."

They investigated the baskets. One

of them held a mixture of cooked grains; a second held a selection of vegetables and the third held more fruit. Spock checked the baskets quickly, and nodded. "Perfectly safe," he said.

They ate hungrily; they had been on the planet for some hours and in typical service fashion took advantage of food when it was available.

Finally, Kirk picked up another of the purple fruits and wandered back to the door, sucking at it. He pulled the door cloth back, and lifted his eyebrows in some surprise. 'It will soon be dark' Akuta had said; but Kirk had not realised how quickly darkness would fall. He turned back into the hut, realising for the first time that - so subtly that none of them had realised it - some sort of artificial lighting had come into effect, exactly matching the intensity of the daylight that had filtered into the hut.

"Vaal?" he suggested, glancing at Spock.

"Probably. A most efficient computer... except that here the computer seems to run the planet. The people certainly do not control the computer. I still do not see any purpose in the situation."

Kirk grunted. "All right. If we're stuck here till daylight - Mallory, you take first watch. Hendorff, the second. Marple, the third. Chekov, the fourth. Two hour watches. If there's more than eight hours of darkness, Farrell will take the fifth watch." He knew better than to try to order Spock's personal guard when there was any alternative. He punched a couple of cushions into a comfortable position, and settled down.

Rank had its privileges. Spock and McCoy each appropriated two cushions as well, and Chekov, Solan and Farrell managed one each. The others, with resigned shrugs, settled down on the hard ground.

Kirk found it hard to sleep, and mid-way through Marple's watch he realised that daylight was showing through the doorway. He scrambled to his feet and moved over to the door.

The sky was blue; the village had a clean, rain-washed look and there was a smell of moist earth and green grass.

The sun was surprisingly high in the sky; the darkness could only have lasted three or four hours. He half expected to see the natives working around their houses or in the neighbouring fields, but the place looked deserted.

Kirk glanced at Marple. "Did that bell sound, by any chance?"

"No, sir."

"I wonder where they've gone?" he muttered, the sense of unease that had kept him from sleeping intensifying. He pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Captain!" It was Scott's voice, urgent and worried. "The ship's been caught in a tractor beam. We canna' move out of orbit."

"It's just holding you there?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Vaal," Kirk growled. "All right, Mr. Scott, I think we might be able to do something about it down here." He replaced his communicator and strode over to the hut Akuta had used the previous day.

It was empty. He looked round it thoughtfully. It was as bare of personal possessions as the one they were in. Did these natives have no needs, no desires in life other than 'feeding' their damn computer?

He moved on to the next hut. Empty.

It took only minutes to ascertain that all the huts were empty. The natives had vanished as completely as if they had never existed.

The landing party gathered in front of their hut. "Any suggestions, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"I think we should visit Vaal again," Spock said slowly.

Kirk nodded, and the group moved off.

The natives were not there, and the Enterprise personnel gathered round the 'mouth'. The eyes were shut, as if the beast slept. Kirk walked slowly up the steps and peered in. The drop down the beast's 'throat' looked to be no more than a few feet, and he beckoned Mallory forward. "See what's down there."

Mallory looked slightly doubtful, but knew better than to object. He dropped into the dim interior of the 'throat', and a moment later called up, "There's a tunnel - quite well lit."

"Right," Kirk decided. "In we go."

One by one they dropped into Vaal's threatening-looking maw. It was a drop of no more than some six feet; it would be easy enough to get out again. Kirk glanced round. Mallory was right; a well-lit tunnel, sloping ever so slightly downhill, led away from the 'throat'. Kirk nodded to the man to led the way.

The tunnel was only some hundred yards long, and opened into a chamber where there were several banks of machinery. An opening on the far wall showed where the tunnel continued on into the hillside.

As Spock crossed to examine the machinery, Farrell touched Kirk's arm. "Captain - we saw the natives throwing chunks of rock into the entry of this place - but there wasn't any rock on the tunnel floor."

"You're right - there wasn't. That means there must be someone down here. But what are they using that rock for?" He glanced at the security guards. "Keep an eye on that doorway - and on the way we came in." As the guards deployed, he snapped his fingers. "Akuta said they 'feed Vaal'. I didn't see anything unusual looking about the rocks... but what if there was?"

Spock swung round from the machinery. "Nothing too unusual," he commented flatly, a deader-than-usual note in his voice as he spoke. "There is one machine which seems to be able to control the weather, one which obviously disrupts any source of power other than that generated by these machines themselves, and another which obviously controls a tractor beam. I have switched those two off and disabled the switches. Mr. Scott should now be able to keep the ship out of danger - and beam us up when we wish to leave."

"Good. But what about the people operating this place? What are they getting out of it? Damn sure they're not just being philanthropical - if that was their idea, why keep the population at thirty four? I mean, I don't see what people want squalling kids for, but most women - civilian women, at least - do seem to want a brood of brats round their heels."

"It is possible that there is some element in the rock which is of value to whoever is operating this place," Spock said slowly. "However, since none of it is immediately visible here, I would suggest we return to the surface and examine the stock of rock at the village."

"What about the people who are operating this... this facility?" Kirk asked.

"We could of course attempt to meet them and talk to them, but I believe that to be an unnecessarily hazardous procedure. They have not shown themselves to be anything other than potentially hostile towards visitors, and I think they have the technology to defend themselves successfully against anything the Empire can 'throw at them', short of complete destruction of the planet." He quoted one of Kirk's pet phrases almost apologetically.

Kirk's eyebrows lifted. It was unlike Spock to be so cautious - on the other hand, if Spock felt it necessary to be careful, it made sense for his Captain to guard his back - and sides - as well. He signalled the landing party together.

"All right, Mr. Spock, I'll take your advice." He indicated the passageway. "Lead on."

Once back at the 'mouth' of the beast that guarded the computer system, it took them only moments to regain the surface. Kirk looked round quickly. There was still no sign of the natives. He led the way back to the small settlement.

Spock crossed to the heap of rock and ran his tricorder over it. He glanced at the reading, frowned slightly, and repeated the gesture before studying the reading more closely.

"An unusual reading, Captain, but I cannot be sure of what it is," he said stiffly.

Kirk half grinned, taking a sly pleasure in seeing his scrupulously precise First Officer for once at something of a loss. He sobered immediately, however; there was still the puzzle of where the natives had gone, and he said so.

"It is possible... " Mallory began hesitantly.

"Yes?" Kirk snapped.

Mallory indicated the heap of rock. "That didn't just appear from nowhere, sir. The natives must collect it, ready for when they need it. Maybe they've gone mining."

Kirk nodded slowly. "Could be," he said slowly. He flicked open his communicator. "Enterprise."

"Scott here." The static that had so interfered with communications had gone.

"Report, Mr. Scott."

"The tractor beam has gone; everything's working smoothly."

"Start scanning for the natives - they can't be too far from the village and are probably all together. Then beam up the landing party."

The scan came up with nothing.

"They could be mining underground," Spock suggested. "The scanners would not be able to detect them there."

Kirk grunted. "Well - I don't want us to be trapped here if the people inside Vaal get their computer up and running again. I don't think there's anything here

the Empire can use, do you?"

Spock considered for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I would say not. A population of thirty-four does not make a work force - especially since it seems they do not breed; there are no obvious minerals to exploit and although the natives seem to feed themselves from the plants growing around and it appears that the ground is fertile, an agricultural colony would be unable to feed itself for a minimum of a year... In addition, there is the problem of Vaal. To dispose of Vaal would - in my opinion - be more costly than the planet is worth."

"Agreed. I will so report."

Kirk glared at the Halkan leader in frustrated anger and with no sympathy whatsoever.

Quite frankly, he did not believe the man. A history of total peace, indeed! Impossible; for if the Halkans, as a race, had never known war, they would have no word for 'peace' nor even understand the concept of anything but peace. Yet Tharn spoke of 'peace' and comprehended that the Empire could - and would - use force against other races.

No. The Halkans must have known war in the past.

He would have respected their views more readily if Tharn had admitted that and spoken of treaties forbidding war, obeyed for so long that obedience had become second nature. If Tharn had spoken of bloodshed so terrible, so widespread, that the Halkans had become terrified of the concept of war, Kirk could have understood it and even secretly sympathised - not that he would have let that influence his actions. He had his orders and would obey them.

The Empire must obtain the rights to Halkan dilithium. Although it was not common knowledge, Kirk had heard that Janus, the present main source of the valuable crystals, was within ten years of exhausting its economically accessible supply. If production in the other planets that produced dilithium was speeded up, their supplies too would be exhausted inside a further decade. All attempts by the Empire's top scientists to find an alternative to dilithium had failed. If the Empire was to survive, it had become essential for it to find another planet carrying enormous reserves.

Not that Kirk had any great love for the Empire; but Starfleet - space flight - was his life. If space flight collapsed from a lack of a vital component... He had no wish to return to an Earth-based life - what could he do there, anyway? - but he also had no illusions about how welcome he - as an ex-Starfleet Captain - would be on any other planet, even a Human-colonised planet, for the Empire, and Starfleet, the force that maintained the Empire's hold on virtually every planet within its reach, had made too many enemies for its representatives to be accepted anywhere on a 'free' world.

He turned his momentarily wandering attention to the situation at hand. 'Die as a race'. Indeed? Kirk was quite sure that if the people of Halka were given the choice instead of having it made for them by this stubborn old fool and his associates, they would have no difficulty in choosing to let the Empire have the dilithium. It - and the mining of it - was a small enough price to pay for their lives.

The Halkan leader looked back at the irate Captain, apparently unmoved, and Kirk was honest enough to concede the man's personal courage, even while he struggled to find further words to persuade the Halkan to change his mind,

all too aware that, behind him, Uhura, Scott and McCoy would be judging his performance and, finding it lacking, be losing some of their fear of him.

He was - quite literally - saved by the bleep of his communicator. Hiding his relief at the interruption with well-practised but totally feigned annoyance, he flipped the communicator open.

"Kirk here."

"Spock, Captain. Sensors detect the rapid approach of an ion storm. It would be advisable to return to the ship immediately; the alternative could be a prolonged sojourn on Halka. This region is known for the violence and protracted nature of its storms."

"A rough ride?"

"If you delay."

"Very well. Four to beam up." He snapped the communicator shut and glared at Tharn. "We have not finished with you. However, you may not have time to regret defying the Empire."

The transporter caught them. Kirk lost sight of Halka, saw it again, lost it, and regained full awareness in the transporter room.

He took one pace forward - and stopped dead, staring at the two men at the console. Their uniforms were familiar... and yet unfamiliar. Kyle wore a command gold shirt instead of an engineering coverall and Kirk's lips tightened. That Kyle should *dare* to wear a standard-style uniform was unheard-of; while one in command gold was unthinkable. But his sartorial sins were instantly forgotten when Kirk turned his attention to Spock, for the Vulcan was completely changed.

His uniform now consisted of a simple blue shirt and black trousers, with no insignia showing except a vaguely triangular shape; but weirdest of all... his beard was gone.

Well, of course, beards are easily shaved off, passed through his mind even as another thought occurred to him. *Jon!*

Fury took him out of the transporter chamber. Of all the officers on the ship, he had come closest to trusting Spock, believing the Vulcan's claim that he did not want command. Now he felt betrayed - doubly betrayed, for it was an unwritten law that when an officer was on landing party duty there should be no moves made to overthrow him. Unwritten - but very necessary, for without that assurance few senior officers would risk going on a landing party - and yet they must, for the success or failure of a landing party sat solidly on their shoulders.

"What the devil are you playing at?" he snarled, trying, even now, to regain control. "Kyle, that was a sloppy beam-up - " His eyes fell to the technician's empty belt. "Where's your agoniser, damn you?"

Kyle threw a puzzled glance at Spock - even in his anger Kirk recognised it as puzzled but not fearful - but Spock was already thumbing the intercom.

"Eight security guards to the transporter room!" he snapped.

By now Kirk had had time to realise that something about his own clothes felt wrong. He glanced down at himself.

Instead of the sleeveless cloth of gold top that he favoured, he discovered he was wearing a command gold, long-sleeved shirt. Now how the devil had Spock managed that? He glanced back at

his landing party; all three seemed frozen with shock. McCoy and Scott looked little different except for the change in insignia, but Uhura's dress was an almost indecently prudish one-piece costume much longer than she usually wore; and her knife, her ever-present companion, was missing. Kirk could tell from her face that she had automatically reached for that knife on seeing the changes in the transporter room and had been shocked into immobility by finding it missing.

The doors slid upen and eight security men rushed in, phasers at the ready. They slid to a clearly puzzled stop, obviously expecting to see a positive enemy but only seeing familiar faces. So - Spock had forgotten to brief them? And yet... they were unsurprised by the Vulcan's beardless face, and he really couldn't see the Vulcan being careless enough to forget any detail when planning a coup.

"This is not our landing party," Spock said briskly. "Take them to the brig."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk fought, of course, even although the other three seemed to be too stunned to resist and went listlessly to their fate.

"What sort of uniform do you call this? Whatever happened to your beard? *Where's my personal guard???*' Only Kirk knew how much of his rage was caused by that last question. What had happened to Jon Farrell?

The forcefield flickered on; even in his blind anger he knew better than to throw himself against it.

Spock looked at him consideringly, and a subtle difference in the Vulcan's calm self-possession drew the Human's attention as Spock replied quietly, "I can answer none of your questions at this time."

The very coolness of the reply quenched much of Kirk's immediate rage. In addition, he had had many years of adjusting his emotions to suit the circumstances. He called on this experience now, controlling his anger and his very real fear for Farrell's safety with an effort that left him momentarily drained.

"All right, Spock, I'll play it your way. What is it that you want? Power?" He didn't think so. He was privately sure that Spock came of a reasonably influential family and could have all the power he wanted. "A ship of your own? I can swing that too." *Not easily - he would have to call on several favours he was due - favours he had been holding in reserve for something a lot more important than providing his second in command with a captaincy; but losing them would be preferable to losing his own command.*

Spock continued to gaze at him with that peculiarly disconcerting expression, as if he was examining an unusual laboratory specimen. Then he turned and began to walk away, clearly uninterested in the offer.

Kirk stared after him, honestly puzzled. "What is it that will buy you?" he called desperately.

Spock paused, and for the briefest of moments Kirk thought he would get an answer. But Spock simply said, "Fascinating,"

...And walked away.

Kirk remained motionless for some moments, staring blindly into the corridor, his mind racing. He could not remember ever being so angry.

Slowly he regained proper, rather than feigned, control of his temper, and began to think.

Why has Spock turned against me? He always said he didn't want command... And where's Jon? And... yes... where is Spock's chief operative... what's his name again? Oh, yes - Solan. It was Solan's absence as much as anything else that puzzled Kirk - he knew that Spock had no more trust in certain members of the crew than he had. Whatever else he might or might not do, he was unlikely to dispense with Solan's services.

In addition, Starfleet was unlikely to support Spock in this move, and Spock was intelligent enough to know it. It was a well established custom that no move was ever made against an officer while he was off the ship. It was widely rumoured that many years previously Starfleet had executed a self-appointed Captain who had assassinated his admittedly incompetent predecessor as he returned from a planetary mission and before he had had time to report his findings to his superiors. The story might have been apocryphal, but it was well-known. As he cooled down, Kirk realised that he did not seriously think that Spock would risk such a coup.

Besides, how long had he had to accomplish everything that would have had to be done, if this *were* an elaborate scheme to take over? Not only the complete change of uniforms - the ship itself would have had to be redecorated - an impossible task in the time he had had, even if he had only concentrated on those parts of the ship that Kirk, arrested in the transporter room and hurried to the brig, was going to see. And in the time available, the smell of fresh paint could not have been dissipated.

Two men turned into the corridor and walked towards the brig. Kirk felt his jaw drop.

The uniforms might have been fabricated and the ship painted at short notice; it would take only a couple of minutes for Spock to shave off his beard; but how could Sulu lose his fencing scar, that scar of which he was so proud, in just an hour?

Sulu and his companion walked past the brig, so deep in conversation that they didn't even pause to glance at the door.

What's happened? Kirk knew, now, that he was frightened.

Slowly he turned to face his crew and saw an expression of total disbelief on McCoy's face.

"Well, Doctor?"

"That... Captain, that was Sulu!"

"Yes," Kirk replied flatly.

"What happened to his scar?"

"The same thing that happened to Spock's beard." He crossed to one of the bunks in the cell, and sat. "I can't believe the Halkans had anything to do with this - whatever *this* is. Those sheep don't have the initiative. As for the ship - there wasn't time to stage manage all this."

"A long-standing plot - " Scott began.

"No. That *could* explain everything else, I agree, if we were to assume everyone in the plot moved *very* fast, but it doesn't explain Sulu's scar."

"What *has* happened to Sulu's scar, sir?" Uhura asked.

"He doesn't have one," McCoy

growled. "It's impossible. Oh, medical science could remove it - if he wanted, which he doesn't - but not in an hour. It would take... oh, three hours at least for a scar as bad as Sulu's, and then he'd have to wear a dressing on it for at least a week to protect the new skin."

"There *was* something wrong with the beam-up," Scott said slowly. "We were beginning to materialise when something went wrong. We were returned to Halka - very briefly - then we materialised *here*. It took longer than it should've done, too."

"You're certain of that?" Kirk asked.

"Aye, Captain."

"So something went wrong with the beam-up."

"Weel... aye, that's about the way of it. On the other hand, we're here - on the Enterprise."

"On *an* Enterprise," Kirk said. "But... is it *our* Enterprise?"

He saw comprehension in Scott's eyes, but McCoy asked, "What do you mean? *Our* Enterprise?"

"Scott?" Kirk invited his Chief Engineer.

"There's a theory - that's all it is - that space consists of several different universes, all co-existing." Scott shrugged. "It's no' exactly the sort of thing that can ever be more than a theory - how can ye prove it? But suppose it was fact? Suppose a doorway has opened between our universe and the one next door, and we've gone through the door."

"This ship must have a Captain Kirk, too - and a McCoy, a Scott and an Uhura," Kirk went on thoughtfully. "I imagine they're on our ship." His lips tightened grimly. "I hope none of them get themselves killed, or we'll have a problem when we get back."

"*If* we do," McCoy muttered pessimistically. "It's not as if we know how we got here."

"The storm," Scott said. "We were beaming up with a bad ion storm developing."

"Could those conditions be duplicated?" Kirk asked.

"I don't know, sir," Scott replied gloomily.

As it happened, they did not spend particularly long in that universe; only three or four hours. Their surroundings faded - it was like being caught in a transporter beam - and then solidified again. They were in an inoperative cell in the brig.

Kirk leaped to his feet and strode out of the cell, not quite running, and closely followed by the others. The corridor looked reassuringly normal. His route took him past the transporter room; just as they reached it the door opened and Spock and Marlena came out.

All six stopped. Kirk glowered at the junior officers. "To your stations!" He watched them go, then - "Report, Mr Spock!" Something in Marlena's expression had told him that these two knew something, even if nobody else did.

"You have been in another universe, Captain," Spock said briskly.

"Yes, I know that!" he snapped. "What's been happening here?"

"Your counterpart chose to give the Halkan leader a further twelve hours to change his mind. I have been told to dispose of you and take over as the new Captain if you have not taken action against the Halkans by planetary dawn over the principal city."

"Damn!" Kirk scowled. "Then I'd better get started, hadn't I." He set off again, Spock falling in at his side.

"It did occur to me, sir... " Spock sounded almost diffident.

"Well?"

"You dealt with Tharn; with one man and his immediate advisers. However - did he speak for his planet?"

"That did occur to me." Despite the urgency of the situation, Kirk stopped to stare at the Vulcan. "Are you saying we could use that? I couldn't think of a way - "

"It is customary to provide the usual example when a race denies the Empire," Spock said slowly, "but can we suppose that the Halkan people, as a race, agree with Tharn? Surely there is opposition to his government, even if it is an unofficial minority of rebels?"

"He *said* they had a policy of total peace - and that implies total agreement."

Spock shook his head. "Impossible. Unless you speak of a race of clones, someone must disagree with the majority. Even on Vulcan there is a minority that refuses to accept the status quo, beneficial though that is to the population.

"It seems to me that Tharn could well be a dictator, even an apparently benevolent one, but - perhaps - executing everyone who disagrees openly with his policy of total peace.

"I suggest we get Lt Uhura to intercept some of the planetary news broadcasts and substitute a message from the Empire, informing the populace of their options. I suspect they will surrender without hesitation. Tharn and his immediate assistants may have a martyr complex, but for most people annexation by a stronger race is undoubtedly preferable to death."

Kirk nodded slowly, consideringly. "It's worth a try," he agreed, and resumed his hasty way to the bridge, Spock at his heels. As they entered the turbolift, Spock said quietly, "If my suggestion works, it was of course your idea, sir. If it does not... there is still time to implement the destruct order."

"Bridge." Kirk looked directly at his First Officer. "Why?"

"I do not wish command. I thought you understood that. If this plan is successful there are ways of turning the delay to your advantage; this will benefit me as well."

The Human nodded. "Advantages... that's true. If an example has to be made, it loses the Empire thousands of potential workers... our bonuses would be less."

Their eyes met. A silent message was exchanged. *But of course we must never admit to personal greed as a motive... or to compassion...*

It worked. The population, once informed of their choice, rose in revolt. For a race who, it was claimed, had a history of total peace, they - or some of their number - proved to be surprisingly competent killers; when Kirk beamed down again to the main city half an hour before planet dawn, it was to be shown Tharn's body and those of his aides -

killed very efficiently, with a minimum of blood, where he would have expected the victims to have been killed very messily. The new leader - if 'leader' he could be called - struck Kirk immediately as a man capable of leading but who was a born follower, only too pleased to surrender his position to someone more able to made hard decisions without agonising over them. The Human smiled to himself, confirmed the man in his unwanted position, knowing that he would be a pushover when it came to providing low-paid labour to work the dilithium mines. Then Kirk returned to the Enterprise and sent his report to Starfleet.

Admiral Komack's reply was edged with suspicion, but of course he had no way of proving that Kirk's actions as reported to him by Spock were anything other than a deliberate attempt by the Captain to demoralise a population of sheep whose value to the Empire as living servants was greater than a dead city would have been. He had, after all, accomplished the required result - Halka's dilithium - within the time limit he had not (officially) known he had.

Kirk sat for some moments gazing thoughtfully at the blank viewscreen after Komack cut the connection. Finally -

"Jon?"

Farrell moved from his position behind the viewscreen and joined him. Kirk waved a casual hand towards a chair and Farrell sat, relaxed yet still radiating alertness.

"Comments?"

Farrell ran a thoughtful hand through his hair. "You're lucky with Spock."

"I know. Not many Captains have a Second who isn't pushing for their job... " He hesitated. "Jon - how much do you know about what happened yesterday? How much does the crew know?"

"The crew? Nothing. Me... I knew it wasn't you here. That's all. Spock and Moreau - they know everything that happened. Nobody else."

Kirk grunted. "It was an exchange - with our counterparts in another universe. A queer universe - they seemed... " He thought about it. "I don't know... naive? Yet - as trusting as they seemed to be, there was a strength there too. What was *he* like - that Captain?"

"Like you said - trusting. He seemed to feel it was perfectly safe to wander around the ship on his own. Chekov nearly got him, too, only Wilson saw the advantage in changing sides. Yet... You're right; there was a strength in him. If he said 'Jump', you knew you damn' well had to or he'd know why. Confident - as if it never occurred to him to doubt his own abilities."

Kirk's brows lifted. "Are you saying I do?" Yet there was no menace in his voice, only an almost casual curiosity.

"No. You know what you can do. But you also know what you can't do - not that there's much you can't do. The difference is... I'd say it never occurred to him that there was anything he couldn't do if he set his mind to it. Even something as crazy as delay following routine orders."

Kirk nodded. "Yeah. I'd've blown that city into dust as soon as I got back... not because I wanted to, but protecting my own position. What he did... and Spock, too... Well, I've come out of it with an enhanced reputation and the ship'll get a good bonus. Yet - even knowing how well this worked - will I

dare ever try something like it again?"

Farrell shook his head. "It's not something you dare try too often, Jim."

Kirk sighed. "I wish I could. I'm tired of killing, Jon... tired of always watching my back even with you there to guard it. What I saw in that other universe... not that I saw much... What you tell me of *his* behaviour... I wish I lived in a universe where I could trust my men. Trust them to follow me without being bribed. Trust them not to reach for a knife the moment I turn my back." He smiled ruefully. "Though I'm luckier than most, Jon. I have you... You know, that was what scared me most at first - it didn't seem possible that Spock could have engineered all the changes I saw in the time he had; but assuming he had... what had he done to you?"

Farrell looked at him with an expression of devotion that he rarely showed. "Jim," he said softly. "I do know you trust me... that we're friends in spite of the difference in our rank and station. You don't often say it, though."

"I know. I suppose... I daren't let myself relax even that much in case I relax too much. I may never say this again - but I really don't know what I would do without you."

They sat silently for some moments, then Kirk said briskly, "You say Marlena knows what happened? I rather thought that."

"Moreau wanted to go back with them."

"Did she, though? I'm not altogether surprised, come to think of it. She doesn't really have what it takes to make a success of living under the Empire."

. . . . . .

His position once again secure, Kirk allowed himself to think over the little he had seen of the other universe. Whatever its form of government was, it seemed to work.

A system based on trust...

He tried to imagine what it would be like, living in a system where he could actually trust his junior officers, and frowned. How did that other universe handle the ambitious youngsters who wanted to move up in rank? He tried to imagine himself serving under the incompetent Pike for years, old before Pike died and left an empty Captain's chair, and knew he couldn't have done it... run the ship but with Pike getting the credit.

Certainly he had been promoted to the Enterprise, but promotion by merit was usually slow, an unwieldy method of advancement. There were always so many good junior officers jostling for not very many senior positions; and if someone was a Captain at 32, as he was... In the normal way of things, if Farrell remained alert and he himnself did not slip up, he could hold that position for thirty years - 30 years in which ambitious First Officers would be denied a possible promotion.

How did that other universe manage?

How *could* it be possible to control ambition?

Kirk strode into his cabin to find Moreau waiting for him. She looked faintly nervous, but met his gaze with what he recognised as forced courage.

He stopped just inside the door, letting it swish shut behind him, and

stepped sideways so that his back was against a solid wall. His eyes fixed on hers, he said quietly, "I hear you wanted to leave... with that other Captain."

"Have you never thought you would like to live someplace where you weren't afraid to turn your back on someone?"

Yes, she definitely sounded nervous, though a degree of defiance - almost bravado - rang through the nervousness. And her question matched his own thoughts so closely that he scowled. "Fear keeps a man on his toes."

"Surely there's a better way of maintaining discipline," she pleaded.

"If you can't stand the heat, you know what to do." There was something about the way she sat, her hands hidden from his sight, that kept him wary; he remained standing, his back to the wall, watching her, where once - yesterday - he would have moved over to his desk or beckoned her through to the night cabin. "You've nearly finished your five year minimum enlistment, haven't you?"

"Nearly." It was a rhetorical question, but she answered it anyway.

"Then I suggest you get out," he said with a gentleness that surprised himself. "You're clearly unsuited to the cut-throat life on a Starship - I've thought that for a while. Don't re-enlist when the time comes. Ask for discharge to one of the frontier colonies where your training will be of use - Starfleet won't try to push you to stay if you do that, and some of those worlds are so harsh that the colonists *have* to trust each other. It's not an easy life - but because you don't have to watch your back all the time, it's probably easier than here."

She looked at him. "Pity?" she asked.

He hesitated, unwilling to admit it. "I think you enlisted without really knowing what Starship life would be like," he said at last.

"That's true. For a woman, anyway. A woman has to have the mind of a whore to succeed here... " She sounded bitter.

"That's possibly a little exaggerated," Kirk protested, "but certainly she has to be hard; ruthless; willing to use influential men to get where she wants. You don't have that instinct."

"No."

"It's not entirely a weakness," he said softly.

She was silent for some moments, looking down at her hands. "I enjoyed being Captain's Woman," she said at last, without raising her head. "*Your* Woman, that is. Pike's Women... " She shook her head. "And Pike was more typical than you. He was more of a sadist than most, but most Captains - most men who want to be Captain - have a sadistic streak. You don't. You're ruthless, yes - but you're not sadistic with it. You don't enjoy seeing people suffer. Maybe this is the wrong job for you, too."

"No. I enjoy the challenge of command."

She raised her head and look at him again, a trace of sadness in her eyes. "In effect... this is goodbye, then. I think you're right - I'll go to one of the frontier worlds."

"I'll give you my backing. There shouldn't be any problem - not with the qualifications you've got. Those are

always needed on frontier worlds, but most people with them are looking for what they think is a more comfortable existence." He grinned mirthlessly. "They must get quite a shock when they discover there's no such thing."

He indicated the adjoining cabin. "You might as well stay there until you leave. I'm not about to appoint another Captain's Woman - not yet, anyway."

"Thank you." Marlena rose and walked steadily across to the door. It swished shut behind her.

Kirk tok a deep breath. *Pity?* he reflected. *No.* What he felt for Marlena was compassion - genuine, as far as he understood the word. She had endured the wrong profession uncomplainingly and even managed to make something of a success of it. Yet what, on Earth, had there been for her? Earth was as bad as Starfleet in its attitudes - worse - and it was only in Starfleet that she could get the training that would help her escape.

How had the Empire managed to develop like this? According to the history books, Noonian I had been a good ruler who had taken a fragmented, polluted, warring world and unified it. His son had expanded the Terran Empire to include a number of colony planets. It had been a golden age - the years of Noonian I and II. What had gone so wrong after that?

The Vulcans were the final group the Enterprise had to pick up for the annual talks on Earth. Ostensibly intended to discuss the general concerns of the Empire and its planets, the talks routinely accomplished nothing more than the delegates' being given an arbitrary statement of the level of taxation to be levied on each planet for that year.

The Vulcan Ambassador walked forward, his face a mask of non-expression. The woman who followed a pace behind him looked calm, but Kirk felt instinctively that it was a studied and fragile calm; that she was far less in control of her emotions than the Ambassador. He spared a split second for speculation. Who was she? Wife, secretary or mistress? The two males who followed three measured paces behind her were obviously aides or, more likely, bodyguards. The Ambassador stopped in front of Kirk as Spock raised his hand, fingers open in salute.

"Vulcan honours us with your presence, Ambassador Sarek. We are here to serve you."

Sarek ignored him and looked straight at Kirk, who had to remind himself that to a logical Vulcan it would probably be more polite to speak direct to the person in authority, who would - equally logically - have left the routine greeting to an underling - since underlings would be the ones 'to serve'.

"Your service honours us, Captain."

Kirk nodded, bending his stiff neck in an approximation of a bow.

Where have I seen this man before? Something about him had seemed familiar even as he approached, and now that he spoke, the sense of familiarity had increased. Yet Kirk knew he had never met Ambassador Sarek.

The Ambassador was speaking again. "My aides... and she who is my wife." He held out his hand, two fingers extended, and the woman moved the necessary step forward and touched her fingers to his.

"Ma'am." Kirk turned to indicate his men. "My First Officer, Mr Spock;

Chief Engineer Scott; Chief Medical Officer Dr McCoy."

Sarek nodded once, in acceptance of the introduction, without looking at the men. Kirk fought to control his too-ready temper at what he saw as a slight, reminding himself yet again that the Vulcan way was different and so direct that even Humans - a race not noted in the Empire for politeness - could easily mistake their directness for rudeness. "I've arranged for you to be given a tour of the ship after you've been shown your quarters. Mr Spock will - "

"I prefer another guide, Captain."

Direct and to the point, Kirk thought. *Don't let the other fellow waste words unnecessarily,* he told himself. "As you wish, Ambassador. I will take you myself." He glanced at Spock. "Mr Spock, we have an hour while the supplies are loaded. Would you care to beam down to visit your parents?" *Anything,* he thought even as he wondered at his own concern for the Vulcan, *to compensate for the Ambassador's attitude!*

"Captain... " Spock spoke uncharacteristically slowly, almost apologetically. "Ambassador Sarek and his wife *are* my patrents."

Well, thought Kirk, *that explains why Sarek seemed so familiar! Must be a family resemblance.*

When Kirk finally returned to his quarters he sank into the chair at his desk and reached for the rarely-touched bottle of brandy in its cupboard. He poured a generous measure and took one healthy swallow, then put the glass down and sat staring at it.

He was more than even convinced that at some time, somewhere, somehow, he had met Ambassador Sarek. But when? How? Where? It was not just a family resemblance, though that was there too. It was more than that.

And - strangest of all - after the last couple of hours spent in Sarek's company, he knew he *liked* the man - in spite of his outrage on Spock's behalf; and even that was tempered, now, with understanding, for Amanda, Mrs Sarek, had found a moment to confide in him that Spock and Sarek had disagreed over Spock's choice of career.

That had made sense, for Kirk knew that although they were ruthless warriors when they had to be - Vulcan had become part of the Empire by treaty, not conquest, after some months of battle had proved to the Emperor that the only way to defeat Vulcan in battle was to destroy it utterly - modern Vulcans fought only to defend themselves and regarded an aggressor as one who disgraced his manhood. Indeed, to come to terms at all, the Emperor had had to blame several of his most senior officers and advisers for the attack on Vulcan and execute a couple all Earth knew he trusted.

Vulcan's influence in the Empire *was* showing, Kirk realised for the first time as he took another sip of brandy. It was rare, now, for a newly-discovered world to be attacked and over-run at first contact. Mostly, now, the planet's population was given the chance to join the Empire peaceably... *though it's barely a choice,* he thought cynically.

Join the Empire or be annexed.

Accept the intruder or be overwhelmed.

Live as servants, often little better than slaves... or die.

His mind went back to Halka. To Tharn, who had chosen to die... and who had not really understood the alternative. He admitted to himself that Tharn's choice had indeed been the sensible one for his people. How happy were the Halkans now? How much freedom did any of them have?

Spock was just completing a report as the buzzer sounded. He looked up.

"Come."

His eyebrows lifted a little as his visitor entered. "Mother!" He stood hastily.

She waved him back into his chair as she took the seat facing his desk, dropping into the local dialect of their home district. "This visit is what you might call... *unofficial*, my son. It is over three years since I last heard directly from you."

He shook his head. "The situation between my father and myself has not changed, nor is it likely to change. I have not been led to believe that he would welcome the arrival of any correspondence from me other than the requests I have made for villeins to support my rank."

"Yet he does make a point of learning what missions are assigned to the Enterprise - and their outcome."

A split second of astonishment showed in his eyes. "I knew his influence is considerable, but it had not occurred to me that it extended into Starfleet... if only because I have attained my present rank."

"Do you think him petty enough to have you denied promotion when you worked for it? I believe he is secretly proud that you never stooped to the assassination of your superior officers."

"What need?" Spock asked carelessly, yet with a watchfulness she noticed. "There were always those ambitious Humans who did it for me, and my own Vulcan operatives to guard my back as I rose in rank."

"Are you really so callous?" she asked.

"Merely pragmatic," he replied.

She studied him for a moment as if trying to read a hidden meaning in his words. At last, she said, "What of Captain Kirk?"

"What of him?"

"It is said that you protect his back."

An eyebrow lifted. "It is not said in my hearing - or his. But yes; I do protect his back. My operatives and his have an agreement. He is ruthless when he must be, but he is not wantonly cruel." He hesitated, then said slowly, "Within the Family, Mother."

She nodded. "Within the Family." It was an oath of silence.

"Something interesting happened a few weeks ago. We were visiting Halka... An ion storm created a short circuit in the transporter, and there was a transfer. The Captain and his party were sent to another universe; that universe's Captain Kirk materialised here."

She waited in silence for some seconds. "Go on."

"They were... completely different; from a universe where there was no Empire but rather a Federation of allied planets. A universe where Fear did not

reign. It did not occur to that Captain that the Halkans should be executed for their leader's refusal to co-operate with the Empire. I was... most impressed by his beliefs."

"And?"

"Even with my help he would not have lasted here for as long as a week. He was no weakling, but he *was* too trusting." He fell silent, looking at something parsecs away, and Amanda waited once more, this time respecting his abstraction. Finally he said, very quietly, "I find it in me to... yes, wish... that we could know that sort of trust here."

"Vulcan does." She smiled ruefully. "That, in truth, was one of the benefits I discovered when I agreed to marry Sarek."

An eyebrow lifted briefly. "You agreed? I always understood it was a political alliance - that as a distant relative of the Emperor, you were really a hostage for his continued... good faith towards Vulcan, and had no choice in the matter."

"True." A brief flicker of bitterness showed. "It was like a slave market. The Emperor selected a dozen of us - relatives far enough removed that he didn't really give a damn about us; all we had was the empty title of 'Lady' and most of us were quite poor. Genteel poverty, of course. It would never do for the Court to realise that the Emperor's cousins got none of the money he lavished on his favourites. Lord forbid we should wear the same dress as we did last year or the year before. He would have noticed. He *did* notice. Before our annual visits to our august Cousin Noonian VII we had to eat bread and dried fish like the poorest commoner for weeks to afford the rich clothes we had to buy each time.

"The only time one of us did wear a dress twice - and it was so well redesigned I would have defied anyone who didn't know it was to recognise it - I know I did not - he still knew. It's possible some servant hoping for advancement told him, of course. She was his niece - the youngest daughter of his youngest brother. He had her entire family, including her father, sold to a brothel, Spock - for shaming him. Oh, nobody knew outside the family; but we were all notified of her 'crime' and punishment.

"So none of us felt like defying him. We duly paraded for the Vulcan males - all minor diplomats - chosen to wed the three of us who were to be hostage on Vulcan.

"They were more considerate of our feelings than the Emperor was. They saw that we were terrified - Vulcan was such an unknown - and did all they could to reassure us... not altogether successfully. But my father had had dealings with Vulcan during the peace talks; and I, at least, knew that when Vulcans gave their word on something they could be trusted to keep faith; and I told them that I was willing - as well as coerced! Sarek, as the most senior of the three, chose me... and against what might be called all the odds, I have been happy enough.

"Though I rarely see them, I believe the other two who were chosen are content enough too.

"Once the other nine had retreated, glad of their escape, all three men promised us that even if the Emperor did break faith we would not die - although he would be told we were dead. As it happens, he has kept faith - for economic reasons. I am not looking forward to seeing him again - but he will be at these talks, and so I must." She fell silent for a moment, then - "Within the Family," she said abruptly.

Spock nodded. "Within the Family."

"Sarek believes you should not be told this. He feels the knowledge would conflict with your oath to Starfleet. But... what you have just told me... " She hesitated, clearly torn between loyalty to her husband and the wish to confide in her son. "Spock, Vulcan is not satisfied with the Emperor's rule, and foresees that the Heir will be even more of a despot.

"It goes against all of Surak's Teachings... but many years ago, within a year of signing the treaty, the Elders realised that we must take a stand against the greed and wickedness of the Ruling House of Singh." She sighed. "So much waste, my son. History tells us that Noonian I ruled well and justly. Noonian II, as well... but after him the line degenerated and Emperor after Emperor became more obsessed with personal power - and wealth. Even prettied up for the history books, that cannot be hidden."

Spock looked thoughtfully at her. "You have never spoken like this before, Mother."

"Had you gone to the Science Academy you would have heard all that - and more - many years ago. But - as I said - Sarek feared the knowledge would conflict with your Starfleet oath. The Enterprise is known as a ship that supports the Empire, and you have never given any sign of being less than satisfied with the status quo."

"I guard my back, certainly. It were foolishness to criticise the Empire openly; but I estimate the Empire will collapse within two centuries. Collapse it must if the Emperors remain degenerate; but if all men of good will were to act too soon, that collapse could be delayed."

"Not if they were organised and acted together."

He looked sharply at her. "Vulcan?"

"Yes. We are slowly getting one of our own into positions of authority on all Starships. Would you be willing to take over the Enterprise at our signal?"

"I will not betray James Kirk, Mother. However... I believe he might be sympathetic. I suspect he is ruthless only to protect his own position."

"You will not betray - No, of course not. This discussion was Within the Family."

"It was between you and me, Mother. Sarek need not - should not - know, at least not yet, that I have been told all this. I will sound out Captain Kirk, and let you know his reaction... but whether it is favourable or not, I will assist as best I can, save only that I will not betray him."

"Does he deserve your loyalty, my son?"

Spock looked at her for a moment, silent. Slowly, thoughtfully, he murmured, "I do not know. I truly do not know."

Kirk woke from a dream that had faded so quickly all he remembered was the pleasantness of it. He lay there for some moments vainly trying to recall it, but it was gone; all that was left was the memory of something enjoyable - *and a lot of use* that *is!* he thought cynically. He wondered briefly how long it had been since he truly enjoyed anything, and with something of a shock realised that his last memory of happiness dated from childhood.

As he dressed, his mind wandered yet again to the report Spock had given

him about the hours when his counterpart from the other universe had been here. That Kirk had not had to live looking permanently over one shoulder. That Kirk had been able to enjoy life in a way that he could not, and he found himself regretting the almost immediate arrest and imprisonment that had kept him from learning more about that universe.

He sighed. Life here would not change simply because he had realised he was dissatisfied with the quality of it.

Perhaps it was in reaction to the hopelessness of his wishes that his face carried a scowl as he left his quarters. Farrell glanced at him and lifted an eyebrow before falling in behind him, the customary two paces to the rear.

Halfway to the mess, Kirk changed his mind. He was not really hungry, and in no mood to eat for no better reason than the hour. "Have you breakfasted yet?" he asked, more harshly than he had intended.

Farrell nodded. "About an hour ago, sir." He was untroubled by Kirk's mood, knowing that it was not directed at him, but also knowing it was wiser to take none of the liberties he was normally permitted.

Kirk looked at him for a moment, then his face relaxed. "How do you manage to put up with me?" he asked ruefully.

Farrell grinned. "Years of practise?" he suggested, instinct telling him that Kirk's mood had lightened. Then, more seriously, "I've - this may sound selfish, but I don't mean it the way it sounds - I've risen further in rank, gained more, than I'd ever have done without you. Putting up with a few... storms... is easy when I think of what my life might have been... when I think how easily I could have died in the gutter of starvation when I was still a child. Besides, you've never been angry with me."

"No?" Kirk considered briefly. "No, I don't suppose I have. But you can't deny that there have been times when you've been the cat I've kicked."

"Once or twice, maybe; but if it helped you to kick the cat, it was worth it. I always knew that was what you were doing. You have the rank, Jim... but we're friends. Even in your worst moods you never forgot that.

"I've seen - and heard - more than you could about how some men in authority act. Pike wasn't unique." He hesitated, then went on. "Before you got senior enough to get me transferred to the Lexington, I was on the Exeter."

Kirk nodded.

"In some ways Captain Tracey was worse than Pike. Oh, we worked standard shifts and got regular bonuses... but Tracey had his favourites and his scapegoats and if something went wrong anywhere, even if the evidence was clear that one of his favourites was guilty, he punished one of the scapegoats. So it was worth his favourites' while to protect him. He used them instead of personal guards. Cheaper, too, when you think of it - no extra money paid by him, just give them the plum jobs that'd get additional bonus and let them off with anything they did wrong.

"Me, I managed to be in the 50% he never noticed till one day I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got an hour in the Booth as a warning to keep my mouth shut. As if the whole crew didn't know the man was on drugs - and an alcoholic."

Kirk stared at him. "You mean... Jon, you mean that when the Exeter was lost... "

"It was probably due to Tracey being stoned out of his mind and doing something crazy."

"Thank God I got you off the Exeter in time! I thought that when she went missing, but... Hell, why didn't you tell me?"

"What point? You could get me assigned to your ship, but you still weren't senior enough to do anything. By the time you were, the Exeter was gone."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose you're right. But what was the Exeter's First thinking of? Why didn't he do something? Or was he an incompetent too?"

"No, he'd've been good if he'd had the chance. Thing was, the poor sod was top o' Tracey's shit list." Farrell shrugged. "The man he rubbed out was the incompetent - Tracey's chief yes man. It was whispered that he was Tracey's 'woman', too, though nobody could prove it. Word on the ship was that Tracey himself had croaked the original First so Roche could get the position, though nobody had any proof of that either; so I guess it wasn't unexpected for Tracey to have it in for the guy that got rid of Roche.

"Wasn't anything Tracey could do to keep Achmet out of the job; but every time Achmet tried to exert his authority Tracey gave him a spell in the Booth."

"The First Officer? My God - did Tracey actually have a death wish?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it. In a way it was counter-productive; most of us would've backed him just to spite Tracey, only we saw that if we were too obviously pro-Achmet, Tracey would've killed him in the Booth. Not a good way to die."

"*Is* there a good way to die?" Kirk asked.

"Peacefully, in bed - in your sleep."

"Not a fate likely to befall any of us. But Jon - why didn't Achmet wipe out Tracey? Surely he must have had the opportunity?"

"I don't know. At a guess the first spell in the Booth, just for giving legitimate orders, did something nasty to his self-confidence. He was never quite so decisive after it."

Kirk grunted, and started off along the corridor again, but as the turbolift doors closed on them he punched the emergency override.

"Hold. Jon, what does the crew think of the Vulcan Ambassador?"

Farrell rubbed a thoughtful hand over his chin. "They don't quite know what to make of him."

"Mmm. And you?"

"I think there's more to him than meets the eye."

"Join the club. Do you like him?"

Farrell scowled. "That's a loaded question, Jim. I don't know." He hesitated. "I don't *dis*like him."

"Keep an eye on him - and on his wife. She's Human, she'll betray *something* to the close observer - "

"If she doesn't know she's being watched."

"You're a good watcher, my friend. Bridge!"

Three days out of Vulcan, Kirk was preparing for bed when the intercom sounded. With a muttered curse - he had been planning an early night - Kirk slapped the switch to 'on'.

"Kirk here."

"Will you come down to sickbay, Captain. Ambassador Sarek has been hurt."

"Hurt? What happened, McCoy?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

Kirk frowned, not liking the sound of that. "Does Spock know?"

"He's right here."

"On my way." *So much for getting to bed early.*

Sickbay presented a picture of chaos that looked disorganised only at first glance. McCoy's staff knew their jobs and while he - or Chapel - were there they did them efficiently. (Occasionally he dropped in unexpectedly if he suspected they were slacking and gave them a shake-up; but he knew too well that too many of them were there purely to have a job with good discharge possibilities. The one effective threat was to get them a dishonourable discharge but he knew he could use that only sparingly or it would lose its effectiveness, for the only official grounds for such a discharge was extreme incompetence - and Starfleet normally weeded out the worst incompetents before anyone was assigned to a ship - apart from the handful who knew, or were related to, the right people. Roughness and lack of compassion were not grounds for complaint even by the patient, let alone the CMO; 'Gentleness,' said Starfleet, 'softens the rank and file' - and even the senior officers were at risk. As has already been stated, a wise Captain cultivated his CMO.)

McCoy was hovering at the doorway of the small ward that was normally unused, reserved for senior officers and any travelling dignitaries. His eyes were fixed on M'Benga, the Bantu Doctor who had specialised in Vulcan medicine, as his subordinate worked over the motionless figure on the bed. Spock stood at the side of the room, his mother beside him, his expressionless face in marked contrast to hers.

Kirk paused for a brief moment to check M'Benga's movements, decided the tall Bantu felt confident and relaxed slightly.

"All right, McCoy. What happened?"

"Security found him lying in a corridor near the main transporter room. He's been knifed.

"Prognosis?"

"Fifty-fifty. He'd lost a lot of blood. Luckily the attacker doesn't seem to know much about Vulcan physiology; he missed all the vital organs. Any other race aboard would have been dead before he was found."

M'Benga straightened. "He'll do. He'll be weak for a few days but he should be fine by the time we get to his meeting."

Kirk nodded. He glanced over to the injured man's wife. "Has the Ambassador any enemies?"

"Captain, anyone in my husband's position has enemies."

"But... on the Enterprise?"

"The other Ambassadors... I would hesitate to say that one of them would actually attack Sarek, but a minor member of an Ambassador's staff, looking for his employer's favour..."

Spock straightened. "Should there not have been an aide with my father? Where is he?"

"Sarek dismissed him. He did not expect an attack here."

"Foolish," Kirk commented, but the knowledge cheered him slightly. If Sarek had chosen to dismiss his guard, Starfleet would be less inclined to blame Kirk for not preventing the attack. He rubbed his chin. "I'd better have a word with the various Ambassadors, but I doubt any of them will know anything. They certainly won't admit it if they do. I'll have to send in a report, and that means questioning all the possible places the killer may have come from."

McCoy grunted. "You mean you send in a report that says 'Nobody knows anything'?"

"Probably," Kirk said drily.

He was right. Nobody knew - or would admit to knowing - anything.

Kirk met up with Spock later that day and gave him a resume of his meetings with the various Ambassadors.

"Garav was abrupt, but made no secret of the fact that he loathed Sarek's blasted guts. Shras was sympathetic in that infuriatingly misleading hypocritical way the Andorians have. Bok wasn't interested - 'no profit in it,' he said. At least the Ferengi are refreshingly honest about their motivation. Tais of Catulla was clearly shocked and seemed genuinely upset - but that might just have been because Sarek survived."

"No. It is not common knowledge, but Tais has been in love with Sarek for years, and I believe he is genuinely fond of her," Spock said. "However, the Catullan laws are such that were she to be discovered in flagrente, she would be exiled, and she is not so besotted as to count her world - and her position - well lost for love; and for Sarek, to lie with someone not his wife would not have been logical. Besides, the two races are completely incompatible sexually, so even if both had been free to marry, there would have been no point. She could be a valuable ally in our search to discover Sarek's attacker."

"Yes... under those circumstances, I suppose she could. Will you speak to her? It might be less than tactful if I did."

Spock nodded. "It would however seem most probable that the culprit is Cardassian or Andorian."

"An Andorian's my guess," Kirk agreed. "Garav's dislike of Sarek was too obvious - though that *could* have been a double bluff, the Cardassians aren't devious, so I think he's genuinely innocent. Proving anything, though... "

"The other question is motive," Spock went on.

"Oddly enough, Shras mentioned that. 'What motive would there be?' he asked. 'There is greed, which benefits us nothing. Revenge - but for what? Ambassador Sarek has not harmed us. We may not agree with his politics but he is a reasonable man; unlike the

Cardassians, he never disagrees for the sake of disagreeing, but can support his position with what he sees as facts.' No. I don't like the man, but if it's an Andorian I'm pretty sure it's not Shras and it's not with his knowledge or consent."

Spock looked thoughtfully at the Human. "We cannot speak to the Andorian underlings, nor can any of my operatives without creating defensiveness... but could Farrell, and possibly other of your operatives, partake of a little judicious gossip with them?"

Kirk regarded his First Officer thoughtfully. "Mr. Spock, I believe that *you* have a devious mind. It must be your Human blood."

An eyebrow lifted. "Undoubtedly." Spock found himself oddly pleased at Kirk's comment, bespeaking as it did a kind of trust that was unrelated to their official positions.

When Spock left Kirk's office, the Captain called Farrell in. "How well have our men got to know our passengers?"

"They've made a point of speaking to them, of course," Farrell replied. "but not to *know* any of them. Mr. Spock's men know the Vulcan aides, of course, but you don't suspect any of *them*, do you?" He went on, as Kirk shook his head, "Their loyalty is absolute. Did you know Vulcan is still in many ways a feudal society? It's about as big a secret as their sexual life is, but reading between the lines of one or two things Solan has said, they best serve their own interests by giving complete service, total loyalty. Of course, the rich - the landowners - have their duties and responsibilities to their men as well. A few of the rich maybe don't bother, but Sarek and Spock do. It's a good enough system - except, of course, when the rich forget their place and seek only what benefits them."

"Corruption even on Vulcan, huh?"

"Vulcan may know it less than other places, but you get corruption any place where one man gets pleasure from watching others suffer, either physically or mentally."

For a moment, Kirk looked at his chief operative in complete silence. "Have I ever given you cause...?" he began, his voice serious.

"No, Jim. Not you."

"Who, then?"

Farrell made a helpless gesture. "Your father - in subtle little ways. He never let me forget my origins. And your brother."

"What? Jon, it's not that I don't believe you - but he hadn't the guts - "

"Sly pinpricks, Jim. Not when he was young, but later, after he went to school. Muttered comments I was meant to overhear. Comments I found it wiser not to notice - which made him think me a fool." He grinned humourlessly. "And I - it gave me a small victory. He never know how much I resented him - his assumptions... or how much they hurt," he finished, barely audibly.

"You should have told me," Kirk said. "I'd've - "

"Let him know how successful he was? No. As long as *you* treated me fairly I could handle it. And these last years have been good, Jim. As your chief operative I have my own status in the crew. And I've got enough money saved to keep me at least in the middle o' the

pack should anything happen to you and I survived."

Kirk looked at him, his expression serious. "I have every intention of surviving all this - " he gestured round - "but if I don't, you're provided for."

Farrell flushed with pride at what was Kirk's open declaration of trust.

"Meanwhile - " Kirk returned to the matter at hand - "get someone talking to the Andorian rank and file. Someone who can twitter on for hours just on the verge of stating a grievance, and aiming that grievance at Vulcans in general and boss Vulcans in particular. Can do?"

Farrell didn't even have to think about it. "Check. There's a young fellow in Security - came on board after we did - can talk the hind legs off a donkey without actually saying anything he could be pulled up for. Everything he says is implied... He's great at trapping the treacherous."

"You trust him?"

"Completely." Farrell grinned. "He owes me. Like I said, he's young, he's lightly built for a security guard, he's pretty, and two days after he arrived he had a bit of trouble with a group of the older men who'd got it into their heads that pretty equalled... let's say female. He's good, but he was badly outnumbered. I happened along just as he was pulled down, and... well, apart from three who were out cold, they ran for their lives. They knew I'd take a dim view of the sort of odds they were throwing at him.

"They reckoned he wouldn't know them, their three pals would be too scared of what the group would do to them not to keep their mouths shut about who the rest of them were, and I hadn't seen their faces clear enough for me to know them." Farrell grinned mirthlessly. "What they'd forgotten was, I knew who those three hung around with. I've made a point of assigning that bunch the most dangerous missions and four of them are dead now. The others know I've got 'em marked. A couple have shown some sense - they transferred off.

"The crew reckon young Carlos is helping Tamura warm my bed, so none of them are bothering him now. I think he was expecting that too, at first, but took the view that one man was better than nine. Now he knows the only payment I look for is his loyalty to me and to you. He's probably the most reliable of all my men."

"Did you ever have - ?"

"Nah. I don't have the looks."

"O.K. Get this Carlos onto the Andorians. See if any of them are loose-tongued around someone they think is anti-Vulcan, maybe even anti-Empire. Or maybe looking to disrupt the talks for some reason? Though why anyone should want to disrupt the Coridan talks I can't think."

"Right."

Kirk watched Farrell leave, then as the door slid shut he leaned his head wearily on one hand. Assassination was not new to him, although Pike was the only senior he had actually disposed of personally. But this... the attempted murder of a passenger by someone on board... this was a situation new to him.

The buzzer sounded and he raised his head, automatically straightening. *Never show weakness before your underlings,* he reminded himself. "Come."

McCoy entered, not quite running.

"Captain, we have a problem!" he began the moment the door opened.

"Yes, we have a problem," Kirk agreed soberly. "Who attacked the Ambassador?"

"More than that!" McCoy blurted. "It didn't show at first - that low Vulcan blood pressure. The Ambassador needs a blood transfusion."

"So?"

"He's Vulcan."

"I do know that," Kirk said drily, with exaggerated patience.

"We don't carry any Vulcan blood."

Kirk stiffened. "Not even for Spock?"

"Not even for Spock," McCoy replied soberly. "We can manufacture plasma for him, but that isn't enough for a serious injury like the Ambassador has... especially since he has a rare blood type."

"Gods, that's all we need!" Kirk nibbled at his lip. "What about his aides?"

"His blood type is T-Negative. One percent of all Vulcans... if that. Just tell me - what are the odds on any of his three aides being in that one percent?"

"What about Spock?"

McCoy looked up sharply. "Spock? His son... It's possible. But there are Human elements in Spock's blood - and the Ambassador needs far more blood than one man could give."

"Maybe. But even a little would be better than none." He punched the intercom. "Mr. Spock to the Captain's office."

Carlos's best efforts produced a possible suspect. Thelev, a junior secretary, had expressed enough discontent with the system for the young security guard to report him to Farrell.

"Was he the only one?"

"Yes, sir. All the others seemed happy enough with things the way they are - or were discreet enough not to moan about them."

Farrell looked searchingly at him, hearing the trace of an ironic note in his voice. "And you, Carlos? Are you happy with the way things are?"

"They could be worse, sir. You know that. They could be worse."

Approached about Thelev, Shras looked as doubtful as any Andorian could. "He is a minor member of my staff," he said. "I know nothing of him save that he has served... adequately."

Kirk scowled. "Not good enough, Ambassador. Thelev has been heard criticising the Empire. It's possible that he tried to kill the Vulcan Ambassador. You know as well as I - indeed, probably better than I - that the Emperor will not be pleased if representatives are not present from all the Empire races."

Shras nodded understandingly. "Is there time to summon another Vulcan Ambassador?"

"No. We're the nearest ship; even at Warp 9 we couldn't get back to Vulcan from here then reach Earth in time for the talks."

"What about one of Sarek's aides?" Shras suggested.

"I'll have a word with them," Kirk decided.

His first opinion of the aides turned out to be correct; the men were bodyguards rather than political aides. His next interview was with Amanda.

Sarek's Human wife was shaking, obviously terrified. "Mrs. Sarek?" he asked.

She looked at him, her acquired Vulcan calm shattering. "Do you know what this will mean?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"The Emperor will not be pleased."

"That's an understatement, Captain. He'll be furious. He'll see it as a personal insult. What this could mean... What this could mean, Captain, is my death - at best. At worst... "

"*Your* death? This whole situation is no fault of yours, Mrs Sarek."

"You don't understand, Captain. How could you? I am a member of the Imperial family - a distant cousin, married to a Vulcan for reasons of state. My life has always been in my Imperial cousin's hands. I have no enemies that I know of; but it isn't impossible that this attack on Sarek is actually aimed at me. If the Emperor feels that Sarek - that Vulcan - has insulted him by not attending the talks - for whatever reason - he will punish Sarek by killing me - or worse. He has never been a man to accept any excuse - for anything."

"Mrs. Sarek... that would be the reaction of someone who was not... " Kirk broke off, realising the indiscretion he was about to voice.

."Not quite sane," Amanda finished. "Captain, the direct line of the House of Singh has been... not quite sane... for four or five generations."

"Do you know what you are saying?" Kirk asked, honestly horrified. If anyone heard her, she *would* die - for treason - and he too for having heard the criticism - true or not.

"The truth, Captain. What I'm saying is the truth." She sounded calm again; almost resigned.

The intercom bleeped. Glad of the interruption, Kirk punched it. "Kirk here."

"McCoy. Thought you'd like to know - the Ambassador's going to live."

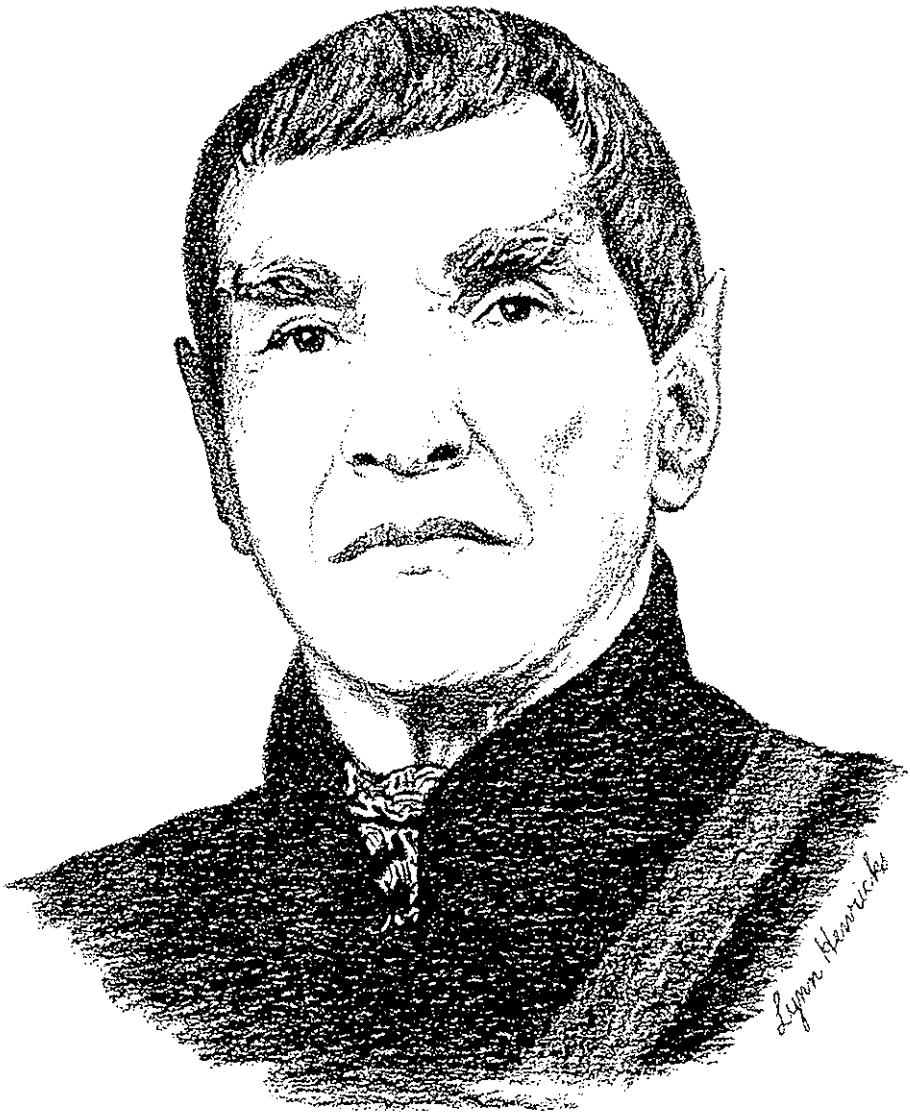
"Bones, you're a genius!" Kirk meant it. "How did you do it?"

"Spock. He reminded me about an experimental drug that enhances blood production. It let him donate enough blood for me to stabilise Sarek. He's still shaken, but he'll be able to attend the talks."

Amanda drew a deep, relieved breath. Not even she was certain whether she was relieved for Sarek's sake or her own.

Later that day, Kirk called in to sickbay to see the Vulcan Ambassador. He walked in to find Spock occupying the second bed in the private room, and the Ambassador lying talking to his wife, who was sitting by his bed.

Something about the angle of


Lynn Henricks

Sarek's head triggered a memory that was years old.

"Vulcan?"

Sarek turned his head to look at the Human. "Hello, Thomas."

Kirk crossed the space to the bed, a disbelieving look on his face. "There was an earthquake. I thought you were dead."

"Ah. I feared you had forgotten me, when I came aboard and you did not acknowledge me. A few days before the earthquake, I was recalled."

"Recalled?"

"Yes. The Vulcan government... I had spent many years studying the conditions on Earth; more years than I thought necessary," he added wryly. "Oh, I had frequent breaks when I reported back and had a few days at home; Amanda thought the duties that kept me away so much were political. But on Earth... You were the only person... You eased the last months of my solitude."

"You taught me so much," Kirk replied softly. "I have not forgotten."

"And now?"

"Now?"

"You say you have not forgotten; but your actions as Captain of the Enterprise are not... shall we say, in keeping with that teaching."

"I walk a tightrope," Kirk said quietly. "You know what life in the slums of Earth is like. You know that I know. I prefer the conditions where I am. But, Vulcan, I have never been wantonly cruel, and when I have been forced to kill, I have killed quickly and mercifully."

"He speaks the truth, Father."

Kirk glanced towards his First Officer. Spock showed no sign of the surprise he must have felt, but then he had had a couple of minutes to regain control of his expression.

Spock continued, "In Starfleet it is necessary that we protect our own positions and be seen to act in a way that will advance the Empire's interests. Captain Kirk has never acted sadistically, nor in a way that ever made me doubt giving him my unqualified loyalty."

Sarek looked thoughtfully from one to the other. "Thomas, would you be willing to defy the Empire - if circumstances dictated that to be a necessary action?"

Kirk stiffened. "You're talking mutiny, Vulcan." He found it easier to use the old, accustomed name of the man who had been his friend, rather than the name of the intimidating Ambassador.

"Perhaps. But consider this." Sarek looked from him to Spock, then to Amanda. "I was one of several, men and women of various races, who spent years investigating conditions on Earth. Some even lived in the palace as servants.

"We saw the last years of Noonian VI. Do you know he died a raving madman? The power was in the hands of the First Minister and his 'advisers', who formed the Emperor's Council. We saw the accession of Noonian VII. We are seeing his deterioration into a madness as great as his father's. He now only signs papers put in front of him by the First Minister - *who is the grandson of the one who served Noonian VI.* The advisers, too, are the children and grandchildren of the ones we first knew.

"The man who will be Noonian VIII

has no interest in ruling. Unlike his father and grandfather, who at least played at ruling, he will be happy with the position, amusing himself with sadistic pleasures while that little clique of hereditary advisers holds the actual power.

"The House of Singh is rotten, Thomas. Rotten. Rebellion is not far off; already more and more of the Empire's annexed races talk among themselves of revolt. Yet without organisation those revolts will all be little ones, with the early ones at least doomed to failure - with its attendant suffering - until at last the Empire's forces are stretched too far and can be defeated.

"We need to be organised if a rebellion is to succeed quickly, with a minimum of bloodshed; we need Starfleet to be, if not our ally, at least willing to stand neutral, to refuse to support the forces of a man who is at best a puppet Emperor.

"Did I teach you well, Thomas, or are you, in spite of my efforts, happy to serve a corrupt system?"

"What would you hope to gain?" Kirk asked, curious.

"There are Singh relatives - distant for the most part - who have not been touched by the madness. We are not looking to overthrow the Empire; but we seek to put on the throne a Singh who is not insane, who can, perhaps, return the Empire to what it was in the days of Noonian I and II."

"It's still rebellion. Still treason."

"Not if it succeeds." Sarek smiled wryly. "If it succeeds, it becomes a coup, and we become heroes."

Kirk looked at him, recognising the sardonic tone for what it was. It was true; a man could be called a hero so easily, depending on which side he supported - and he was in a position where he could be called a hero by either side. He could pretend to go along with the Vulcan revolt, and at the first possible moment betray it to Starfleet Command, and become a hero for saving the Empire; or he could genuinely support them and be the hero of a coup. And from the expression in Sarek's eyes, he knew his old Vulcan friend was well aware of it.

"All right. You say you need Starfleet at least to stand neutral. I say you would need Starfleet's active help. At the same time, however, Starfleet could be crippled in fairly short order if the Starbases remained loyal to the Empire. Even the best dilithium crystals have a very short life when they're under stress - that is, any speed in excess of warp one or any tight manoeuvres. We need to call in to a Starbase every two - three months to restock. If we can't... Well, let's just say you have some very expensive hunks of metal that can't travel faster than impulse speed and with only minimal forward shielding. Ten years from Earth to Vulcan rather than ten days. While the ships that have remained with the Empire can run rings round us and pick us off at no danger to themselves."

Sarek smiled slightly. "The ships would need a slight modification, true; but this has already been researched. We have a viable alternative to dilithium."

"Viable? How? The Empire's scientists - "

"This is a naturally occurring mineral, even rarer than dilithium. So far it has been found on only one planet - a planet which you yourself reported as being useless to the Empire."

Spock stiffened. "Is that why there are Vulcans on Gamma Trianguli VI?"

"You know of them?" Sarek asked.

Spock threw an apologetic glance at Kirk. "I detected the hidden presence of Vulcans, and chose not to report it. Perhaps I guessed, even then, something of what you have just told us... "

"The rock the natives throw into Vaal? And what of Vaal, anyway? What is it for?" Kirk demanded.

"That was there when we arrived several years ago, and the natives who 'feed' it. It controlled the weather - how, our scientists are not quite sure - but that was all. We managed to get into it over several nights without the natives seeing us, and investigated it. It was not easy; the passageway was all but blocked by the rocks the natives had been throwing in for years. There were half a dozen skeletons there - of a race we cannot identify, but who, we assume, were the builders. What their purpose was we can only guess." He gave a very Human shrug. "Vulcans are not good at guessing.

"The computer complex had mostly switched itself off from lack of power - it's necessary for the people controlling the complex to collect the rocks and use them to fuel the computers. Obviously the weather control had top priority in the system.

"It took a while, but we worked out how everything functioned, and 'took over' the running of Vaal. We also investigated the properties of the rock, and discovered in it a useful substitute for dilithium; and it is far more durable, too - for example, as you said, dilithium regularly stress fractures as soon as you drop from a higher speed, even warp two, back to warp one. This stuff - we call it vaalite - shows no signs of stress damage unless you give it prolonged usage at warp six or higher - and even then it's minimal. Oh, it still has to be replaced - but not as a matter of urgency. Even damaged, vaalite continues to give adequate performance at low warp speeds almost indefinitely. We acually use very little of it to power the computers; a ship calls and takes the excess rock to Vulcan every second month. We have a good stock; enough to fuel all Starfleet's elite ships for approximately five years. We suspect the original builders of Vaal may have wanted the vaalite too, otherwise why have so much thrown into it?"

Kirk looked thoughtfully at him. "You're being very... indiscreet, Vulcan. You're telling me an awful lot. Are you so sure of me?"

"I am sure of my young friend Thomas," Sarek replied softly.

Kirk grinned. "I think perhaps you're right. What I saw of that other universe... But the upheaval will be quite traumatic for the Empire."

"Yes. There will be deaths and much suffering. The quicker the revolt, the less the suffering."

"All right. I'm with you. What must I do?"

Sarek looked at Spock. "What of you, my son?"

"Mother has already told me something of this. Yes, I too am 'with you'."

"Excellent. This is one of the few ships where we have, to date, had no open supporters. It is most gratifying to know that both of you support Vulcan in this.

"You will be sent a signal when we are ready to move, which will not be for some months yet. Meanwhile, it would probably be a good idea to transfer off any crew you feel doubtful about."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other. "I have already managed to do that throughout much of the ship," Spock admitted. "Science is totally trustworthy; so is Engineering. Apart from Sulu, we should have no problems with Security. I believe Dr McCoy would welcome the opportunity to dispose of certain of his junior personnel, even although it would mean his department working short-handed. Of the small departments on the ship, such as Communications... I doubt any of them would be a danger to us."

"Chekov?" Kirk asked.

"I do not trust him, but I believe his attack on... your counterpart... was an opportunist one. I do not think he has the imagination to plan well ahead, or the foresight to realise the advantage he could gain by betraying us."

"I'm not so sure," Kirk said. "However, I have a means of finding out."

Spock's gaze was calculating. "Your counterpart said something... 'In my cabin there is a device...'"

Kirk stiffened, then relaxed. Everyone in the room was an ally, after all. "Yes. Something I picked up on Tantalla."

"Tantalla? They had no technology."

"Didn't they just. A scientist in the southern army was... let's say completely unscrupulous, by his planet's way of it. The northern 'secret weapon' was a crossbow they were reluctant to use. Everyone assumed the southern secret weapon had to be something similar. Yes?"

"Yes," Spock nodded.

"Uh-uh. Their scientist had the ultimate killing machine. A good old-fashioned 'death ray'. He was trying to perfect it to stun rather than kill. I did debate telling you about it at the time, Spock, but in the end I didn't."

"But you did tell Moreau? Or else how did your counterpart know?"

"She found out by accident. A moment's carelessness," he admitted.

"You were fortunate. Many women in her position would have betrayed you."

"Not at first," Kirk replied. "Not while my position remained secure, or unless I had given her cause to hate me. As for Marlena - our relationship may have deteriorated to habit, but I *had* saved her from Pike, and she didn't forget that."

"To depend indefinitely on gratitude is foolishness."

. "Perhaps. But I did learn early that self-interest is more powerful than fear in getting you what you want. She feared Pike too much to surrender to him. She was grateful to me - and gave me what she had denied Pike. I rest my case."

Sarek interrupted. "This... device, Thomas. It does not sound like the kind of weapon we would want to use. We are not seeking to replace one tyranny with another."

"I don't think you could use it. It needs to be installed where it's to be used. It took Farrell and me a long time to get it up and running."

"Farrell too?" Spock said. "Yes, of

course. Solan said you give him much freedom; much trust."

"Since this seems to be a time for honesty - he's my foster brother. My mother died when I was born; my father took in Jon's mother as a wet nurse and sort of housekeeper. When he finally decided we didn't need her any more, he offered to give Jon a home - a sort of bonus for her, I suppose. Father saw Jon as a servant for us - he never did realise that Jon and I were genuinely fond of each other." He looked at Sarek. "Jon would have come with me, back when you and I knew each other - but I never let him know what I was doing, in case my father found out and sent him away."

Sarek nodded as Kirk went on thoughtfully, "I wonder just how many of my officers we can trust?" He glanced at Spock. "Scott, certainly. He's not really interested in anything but his engines and as long as he's guaranteed a continued job in Engineering he'll go along with us. McCoy, too," he added thoughtfully. "He's a good doctor - at least, he would be if he got the chance, and I'm sure he'd go along with us if he was assured that with the Empire overthrown he would have a better chance of practising medicine the way he wants to. He would, wouldn't he?"

Sarek nodded. "We want to see things improved, Thomas, not made worse."

Kirk scowled. "As for the other seniors... Uhura, I'd think; she's one tough lady, but there are times I think she'd be glad to live where she didn't have to watch her back all the time. Not Sulu or Chekov; they're both too ambitious. Not that Chekov really has what it takes," he added as an aside. "Given the status quo, he might make First Officer, but I doubt he'd get beyond that; someone else would knife him before he could establish himself in the position. Sulu, on the other hand... "

Spock nodded. "I agree," he said quietly. "Of the senior officers, we can trust Scott, McCoy and probably Uhura; of the crew, who knows?"

"Surely life for the enlisted men is hard enough that they would welcome any change?" Amanda asked.

"It's not as simple as that, ma'am," Kirk said quietly. "No doubt some of them would; a lot depends on their planet of origin. For many of them... Life in Starfleet is not easy," he commented, apparently irrelevantly. "Yet even so, it's easier and more secure than life in the slums of Earth, or life on a colony planet where their entire existence is devoted to repaying the money spent on setting up the colony in the first place. Repaying that money could take a colony three or four generations - indeed, it could take even longer if they were unlucky. But having said that - for most of them, life in Starfleet is far from pleasant. However, many of them have had the spirit - what spirit they might have had - knocked out of them by the sheer brutality of Starfleet's discipline. They could well feel 'better the devil you know', and be afraid to take the risk of resisting that devil. I doubt any of them would actually betray us, though. Starfleet Command is quite surprisingly short-sighted, and if a crewman reported a planned revolt to Starfleet, the odds are that Starfleet would accuse him of having been part of the revolt, chickening out in the hope of escaping punishment, and execute him anyway."

"Short-sighted indeed," Sarek commented.

It was decided that Kirk should

approach the three officers they thought they could trust and sound them out, initially leaving all three in ignorance of Vulcan involvement. Farrell, meanwhile, would sound out the crew, and see how many of them trusted Kirk enough to follow him into a revolt. Privately Kirk expected only a handful to do so - certainly not enough to man the ship - though Sarek assured him that in that case, the crew who did not want to be involved would be interned on Vulcan and Vulcan crew would take their places.

He decided to speak to Scott first - the one he was surest of, since Scott had no interests outside his engines. He headed for the engine room, where he found the Chief Engineer standing over a very junior Ensign while the youngster checked some wiring.

"A word with you at your convenience, Mr Scott."

Scott glanced at his Captain, then back at the youngster's work. "Carry on wi' this, laddie, but dinna put the plate back until I've checked it."

"Yes, Mr Scott, sir." The young man's face paled as he realised the responsibility left on his shoulders.

The Engineer grinned mirthlessly. "Dinna' fret, lad. I'd no' be letting ye do this, even under supervision, if I didn't think ye could do it. Just take yer time, dinna' rush, an' ye'll manage fine."

"Yes, sir."

Scott led Kirk into his small office, and turned to face him. Kirk studied the Scot for a moment. Most officers - even senior ones - called for a 'word' with the Captain showed a degree of uneasiness as they wondered why the Captain wanted that 'word'. Scott showed no sign of any uneasiness. "Clear conscience?" Kirk asked.

"Aye, sir."

Kirk nodded towards the door. "He *is* competent? You weren't just trying to boost his morale?"

"Entrusting delicate machinery to an incompetent is madness, sir," Scott replied. "I've found a sweetie often works better than a stick when it comes to getting the work done properly."

"Praise where praise is due, huh?"

"Aye, sir. But as well - a man afraid o' punishment for a mistake - even an honest mistake - is a man whose fingers'll slip. And in Engineering ye can't afford men whose fingers'll slip."

"That's an almost... revolutionary... opinion, Mr Scott."

"That's as may be, sir, but I dinna often have to punish carelessness, an' I dinna think ye've any complaints to make about my department. Now when I was a junior on the Hood, the Chief Engineer was a real sadist - he'd punish the slightest thing - even something as minor as dropping a screw would earn the culprit a dose o' the agoniser. We a' breathed a sigh o' relief when he managed to electrocute himself just a couple o' months after I joined the ship." Scott gave a reminiscent half smile. "It was a right clever bit o' sabotage, an' it was never proved to have been anything but an accident."

Kirk looked suspiciously at the too-innocent face of his Chief Engineer. "You're sure it was sabotage?"

"Between you an' me, Captain, it was the only time I ever wiped out a superior officer. I was too junior to benefit directly, and junior enough that I

might have been punished for it, so I kept my mouth shut; though come to think on it, the Captain might have guessed it was me, because the others had been suffering under him a good bit longer an' he'd broken their spirits - even his second was too scared o' him to risk trying anything. It taught me that fear isn't a good weapon; it can be self-defeating. The Hood's engines had more malfunctions in a week that ours have in a year - until Thoreaux electrocuted himself, that is. It was better under Chang, though he wasn't as good an engineer. Pity Thoreaux was so vicious."

"An interesting comment, Mr Scott. Tell me - how would you like to live on a ship... in a universe... where that sort of cruelty wasn't allowed?"

"I'd like it fine, sir, but - though I don't need to use it - how would discipline be maintained if we didn't have the agoniser or the agony booth as a last resort?

"What sort of punishments do you give, Mr Scott? I'm quite sure your entire department isn't composed of angels!"

"Loss of privileges, compulsory overtime... I see what you mean, sir. There are other ways to punish someone!"

"Correct. So - If I was to tell you that I was quite impressed by the little of what we saw of that other dimension, and would like to see some of that sort of easier discipline here, on this ship - would you be interested as well?"

"Aye, sir - and the whole of my engineering staff with me!"

Kirk's eyebrows lifted. "That could be a chancy certainty, Mr Scott. What if I was just testing your loyalty to the Empire?"

"You're not that underhand, Captain. You're ruthless when you have to be, but you're not underhand. Now I don't know what ye have in mind - but from what you've said, I know you've got some sort of plan brewing. You can count on me, sir - never fear."

"Thank you, Mr Scott. I can't tell you more just now - things are still in the planning stages, and I'm not one of the ringleaders. I'll let you know more as soon as I can."

"Aye, sir."

The two men left the small office and went back to where the young officer was still working at the wiring. "Not finished yet, lad?"

"Nearly, Mr Scott. The wire here was showing signs of wear, so I replaced it - this is the bit I took out."

Kirk watched as Scott took the wire and checked it. "Aye, ye did right. Look, Captain - this could have snapped any time."

Kirk glanced at it and nodded. "Good," he said briskly. "Carry on, Mr Scott."

He left Engineering, well satisfied with Scott's reaction, en route to Uhura's quarters, knowing that the communications officer would be off duty. He buzzed for entrance.

"Come."

Uhura was sitting beside her bed, carefully sharpening her knife. She came to her feet. "Captain?"

"As you were, Lieutenant."

She sat again, putting the knife down on the bed. She toyed with the

honing stone as she waited for Kirk to speak.

"Nervous, Lieutenant?"

"Not really, sir. I'm just wondering what brought you here."

"A good bluff, Lieutenant - but relax, I'm not another Pike, and I'm hurt that you could even think that I might be." It was a guess, but he saw instantly that it was a correct one.

"I didn't really think it, sir, but when a senior male officer comes to a female officer's quarters, what *is* she most likely to think? Especially when you no longer have an official Woman?"

"I see what you mean. But as far as I'm concerned, Lieutenant, you are one of my senior officers, and therefore off limits - and while I certainly have an eye for a pretty woman, I've never taken an unwilling partner. Moreau was a volunteer for the position of Captain's Woman."

"Yes, sir."

"It never occurred to you that I might be dissatisfied with something?"

"No, sir. I do my work well, and I know it - and my department is run efficiently."

"Yes, it is." Kirk hesitated. "Lieutenant, you were one of the officers who visited that other dimension. What did you think of it - the little we saw of it?"

"It was certainly interesting, sir - the little we saw of it. I was most interested in how that Uhura behaved while she was here - what I heard of it."

"And how that Kirk behaved. That Enterprise seemed to be run on quite different lines."

"Yes, sir, it did."

"Lieutenant - feel free to speak candidly. This is between us. How would you like to live in that kind of world, that kind of ship?"

Uhura was silent for a moment. "It would be interesting - I might almost say refreshing - to live in a society where I didn't have to carry a knife all the time - as a defence against people like Sulu."

"Or live in a society where there weren't people like Sulu?"

"Yes. Oh, I don't blame Sulu for being the way he is - I know what happened to him with Pike. I suppose we might say 'a society where the sort of thing doesn't happen to twist people the way Sulu was twisted'."

"Would you like to try for one?"

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Are you talking sedition?"

"I might be."

"Then yes - I would like to try for one."

Kirk's next stop was sickbay.

McCoy was in his office, checking over a list of supplies used. Kirk closed the door and stood looking at him. He glanced up.

"Yes, Captain?"

"How would you like to live somewhere where you had a free hand to get on with your work?"

"There isn't such a place."

"What about that other Enterprise?"

"We're not on that other Enterprise."

Kirk looked at him. "Satisfied with the way things are?"

"No, but there's nothing I can do about the way things are."

"Maybe there is."

"What?" There was a hopeless note in McCoy's voice.

"You do sound gloomy."

"Captain, I know things are better on the Enterprise than they were under Pike and than they are on pretty well any other ship in the Fleet, and believe me, I appreciate it. But not even you can take on the Establishment."

"Why not?"

"Got a suicide wish, have you? Well, maybe you can afford it. You don't have any relatives back on Earth, do you?"

Kirk shrugged. "None that I know of. My father's dead - I know that, although I pretty well lost touch with him years ago, because I got a share of his estate when he died; but apart from that he was ever much of a father to me. He was too concerned with his own position. He killed my mother because of that."

McCoy looked up, his attention momentarily caught. "Huh?"

"He was a Government worker. When he was transferred, he took her with him although she was pregnant and he knew she wasn't keeping well. He could have delayed moving her until I was born. But he didn't, and she died giving birth to me. He killed her."

McCoy frowned. "The system didn't work that way, Captain. If he'd left her behind, at the very least he'd have had a black mark on his record. It would have stopped his career short right where it was."

"So he thought more of his career than his family. It figures. When he was transferred again, he left Farrell's mother behind. She started off as my wet nurse and ended up as his mistress - back then I didn't realise that, but I've come to understand she must have been. He deserted her, too, and I've no idea where she went."

McCoy looked up in surprise. "Farrell's your foster brother?"

"Yes. Why else would I trust him as much as I do?"

"I've wondered about that."

"My real brother is dead. The authorities don't know Farrell is my foster brother - as far as they're concerned, he's just one of my operatives."

"Right. But I'm in a different position. I've got a daughter back on Earth - and even though her grandfather is the Surgeon General, that wouldn't stop the powers-that-be executing her - and maybe him as well - if they doubted my loyalty. Whatever you're planning, Captain, I don't want to hear about it. I won't betray you, but for Jo's sake, I daren't help you."

Slightly depressed at his failure to convince the officer he had most expected to join them, Kirk made his way back to the cabins assigned to the Vulcan

delegation.

He entered to find Sarek alone, sitting pensively in front of a blank viewscreen. There was no sign of Amanda.

Kirk crossed to the Vulcan and dropped to a once-familiar position sitting at Sarek's feet. The years slipped away; he leaned his forehead against Sarek's leg in a gesture that had once been his automatic, wordless plea for his Vulcan friend's help.

Sarek dropped a hand onto the Human's shoulder. "A problem?"

"McCoy. He won't betray us, but he won't join us either. He's afraid for his daughter's safety."

"Can you discover where she is? We do have agents on Earth; it could be possible for us to rescue her."

Kirk raised his head and gaped at Sarek, momentarily startled, and then mildly amused that he should be. Hadn't Sarek told them there had been many... yes, spies... checking on Earth for many years?

"I already know. She's with McCoy's father-in-law; he's the Surgeon General."

Sarek's face lightened in what Kirk had, years previously, realised was a smile; and for the first time he consciously realised that this was why he had always been able to 'read' the handful of Vulcans he had served with. "Then she is already one of us," Sarek said quietly. "I mentioned a sympathiser who is caring for the youngster we hope to instal on the Imperial throne."

"Yes."

"Admiral Martin. The Surgeon General, my friend."

Kirk's jaw dropped.

EARTH

The Enterprise, while not the first ship carrying delegates to reach Earth, was far from being the last. With the diplomats beamed down to their accommodation on Earth, the ship was sent to dry dock for a bodywork check of the kind impossible to carry out while the ship was in deep space and most of the crew was granted leave. Those of the crew with family on Earth took the offered leave, happy to be away, for a few days, from the strict discipline; a handful who did not originate on Earth went to the Starfleet recreational facility where, as long as they remained reasonably sober, they could also escape the severest levels of discipline. Those who remained on the ship knew that as long as they were careful, they too could relax somewhat.

Kirk was among the ones who initially chose to remain on the ship, but he changed his mind when McCoy invited him along to meet his daughter. Leaving Spock in command, he went cheerfully enough, quite glad of the break.

Admiral Martin and his family greeted McCoy affectionately, and Kirk politely. The family consisted of Martin himself, his wife Sarah, an unmarried daughter (Norah) who looked about thirty, and eight youngsters ranging in age from about twelve to the late teens, all of whom Martin introduced to Kirk as those of his grandchildren who lived with him while their parents were on active service. McCoy's daughter Joanna was the youngest of the eight; the others were named as David, Jason, Alenna, Robin, Scott, Lileas and Norman. Kirk greeted

them cheerfully, wondering which of them was the Singh relative - or whether, since McCoy had contacted Admiral Martin to let him know they were coming, the potential Emperor had been hidden away.

Kirk was aware of a momentary pang of envy as he watched the cheerful affection that was so obvious in this family - a family of which McCoy, son-in-law though he was, was clearly a part. It was so different from the home life he had known.

Mrs Martin's cook had prepared a meal, and as they all sat round the table, Kirk decided that the young heir had to be present, although he had no clue as to which of the youths it might be. *Does the boy even know what's planned for him?* Kirk wondered.

He was placed between Alenna and Robin, two rather pretty girls in their mid teens, and he flirted cheerfully - but lightly - with them both, careful to remember their youth and the fact that their guardian was present - and an Admiral. Alenna responded more willingly than Robin, who seemed to withdraw slightly into herself as soon as he told her how pretty she was, so he addressed most of his remarks to her more outgoing relative.

The meal was very good, reflecting the wealth that the powerful and influential could command, and afterwards the party adjourned to the Admiral's comfortable sitting room, and conversation became general.

Perhaps inevitably, the subject turned to the reason for McCoy's - and Kirk's - presence. Joanna, innocently enough, brought it up by saying to McCoy, "The Enterprise doesn't often come back to Earth, Daddy. I wish it did so you could come home more. Will we see you again before you have to leave?"

"We were just lucky this year, Jo. We had to bring the Vulcan Ambassador to the Emperor's annual meeting, and if your Grandad will give me a bed, I can stay for a couple of days because the ship's getting a check-up while we wait for the talks to end so we can take the Ambassador home again."

"This is the time of year when the Emperor has a lot of meetings and parties and things, isn't it? There was a dance last week - Grandad and Gran and Robin went, but I don't think Robin enjoyed it much." Jo was speaking to her father, but her words dropped into one of those silences that sometimes fall in a general conversation.

Robin's voice quivered with remembered humiliation as she said, "No, Jo, I didn't. The Emperor is a foul, dirty-minded old man!"

"Robin!"

The Admiral's voice reminded her that although Jo's father was family and might be trusted with an indiscreet comment, the company included a Starship Captain who could make a great deal of trouble for her - and for her grandfather - if he was so minded.

"I... I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't really mean that. It... it's just... the Emperor is even older than Grandad, but he... he flirted with me... and I didn't know what to say to him... and... "

"I know exactly what you mean, Robin," Kirk told her, taking pity on her confusion. "It was your first big party, and you didn't know how to deal with the... er... gallantries of someone you thought would be too old to be affected by a pretty face."

"Yes! Yes, that's what I meant," she agreed quickly.

The Admiral began to relax slightly, and Kirk grinned. "You know something, Robin? You'll never be a good diplomatic liar. You were right the first time. Noonian VII *is* a lecherous old goat."

There was a concerted gasp from the Martin family. Despite himself, McCoy's lips twitched. Kirk turned his grin on Martin, briefly enjoying the senior officer's shock.

"We brought the Vulcan Ambassador to Earth," he reminded the Admiral. "He's my First Officer's father. He told us about Vulcan's plans... and that you were in agreement with them. I meant to let you know before the evening was out - Robin just speeded things up a little."

"I had not expected Sarek to be so... indiscreet," Martin said slowly.

"Admiral... I knew Sarek, on Earth, when I was younger than Jo. He was living in the Old City as a slum dweller; I was a curious child who wandered into the slums to see what they were like. He helped me, and he taught me a lot - and I've never forgotten what he taught me," he added, serious now. "Over the years I've had to do many things I regretted. I've been ruthless; but I've never been sadistic with it. Sarek knew he could trust me; but even so, he would not have told me about you had McCoy not been afraid to join us for fear of what might happen to Jo - and to you and the rest of your family."

The Admiral looked at his son-in-law. "Leonard?"

McCoy nodded. "I told Captain Kirk I would keep quiet about it."

"I was worried that we could end up on opposite sides in what could be a very bloody revolt," Martin said. "Captain Kirk has a certain reputation in Starfleet... How could we think he would join us? You needed a position quickly and under Kirk the Enterprise was a successful ship - but I know what happened to his last medical officer."

"Piper?" Kirk said. "A very brave man."

Martin's eyebrows lifted. "Captain - I have long wondered. Why *did* you destroy Gorla? The rebels were on a colony world. And why didn't you beam Piper back to the Enterprise first?"

"There was a virulent and extremely contagious wasting disease on the planet. Piper was there five minutes - and when he checked his own readings he found he was infected. It was Piper who told me I had to destroy the planet completely; fortunately there hadn't been any other visitors, nor had any ships left the planet, since the disease developed. Piper knew that if he returned to the ship he would infect us all. He chose to stay. I told Admiral Komack the truth; we decided that the Empire should be left believing I acted to punish the Gorlan rebels. If Komack chose not to tell even the Surgeon General, that was his decision."

"I see." Martin's lips tightened. "I, at least, should have been told, in case anyone *had* carried the infection away from the planet. Did Piper discover anything about it before he died?"

"He said it was similar to, but far more infectious than, a disease found on Earth some three hundred years ago. He called it Aids."

Martin whistled softly. "That was a nasty one," he said. "Doctors tried for several years to find a cure - or at least a

treatment - for it, and failed. It was worse in some parts of the world than others, and because of the way it was transmitted, some sectors of society were more prone to it than others. One of the first things Noonian I did, once his position was secure, was decree that every sufferer should be put to death as soon as the condition was confirmed, and the bodies completely destroyed by fire.

"It took a few years, but we wiped it out... The decree was never repealed," he added. "Piper would have known that." He was silent for a moment. "It is as well I know this condition has recurred. But enough of solemnity! We should not spoil Leonard's reunion with Jo."

"Agreed," Kirk said. "The last I will say of solemnity this night is just - remember; the Enterprise is for the revolution. We have already removed from the ship those few of whom we had doubts. Most of them got reports that meant they were assigned to rather remote starbases, rather than being assigned to other ships," he added.

If he had hoped that his comment would lead the Emperor-to-be to reveal himself, he was wrong; he returned to the Enterprise still completely unaware of who the revolution hoped to put in Noonian's place.

Sarek and his wife returned to the ship after the talks, she with a look of relief on her face that the annual ordeal of meeting her distant relative was safely past, but a relief that was strangely mixed with horror; he with a grim expression that took Kirk to the Ambassador's cabin as soon as the ship swung out of orbit en route to Vulcan.

"What happened?" he asked. "You look as if you've seen the devil himself."

"I think I have. I knew Noonian was corrupt, I knew his son was even worse... Thomas, the revolution cannot be delayed much longer."

"What happened?"

"At the dinner after the talks... The... 'entertainment'... that was offered... One of the guests - his *guest*, Thomas! It was planned beforehand - everything was too ready! One of the Emperor's minions accused the man of plotting treachery. He was dragged from his seat, protesting his innocence - he was stripped, chained to the floor in front of the Emperor and tortured. From time to time he was asked the names of his accomplices, and all he could do was scream his innocence, his loyalty to the Emperor... "

"He was not known to you?"

"No. And the rest of those present - for our own safety, we could do nothing but smile when the Emperor smiled, clap the 'skill' of the torturer when the Emperor's advisers clapped. But I saw the eyes of men who until that evening had remained firm in support of the Emperor. He lost himself a great deal of support that evening.

"And then we discovered the real reason for the charade. When the man finally died - and I think he died more quickly than the Emperor would have liked - he beckoned to the guards who were holding the man's wife - and ordered them to take her to his bedchamber and chain her to his bed. 'Behold my new concubine!' he said.

"Nobody said anything. It's possible, I suppose, for a still ardent supporter to convince himself that Noonian enslaved her - for that is what it was - because her husband was a traitor; but in the eyes of everyone around I saw the knowledge that the man died because

Noonian wanted the woman for himself."

Kirk was silent for a moment. "Vulcan - you said you had sympathisers on a lot of ships; you said nothing of their positions, but I was left with the impression that you had not actually approached the various Captains?"

"True," Sarek agreed. "We dared not take the chance that the Captains would favour change. I would not have risked telling you, if you had not recognised me."

"Ah, well; while we were in dry dock I seized the opportunity to speak to several other Captains. Wesley, Decker, Merrick, Garrett, April and Terrell all actively do support the idea of change. Achmet and Noguchi are too vulnerable to give active support just yet - they have too many relatives on Earth; they'll give support if they think there is any chance of success. They won't stick their necks out otherwise, but they will refrain from... er... interfering in what the rest of us do. And since I guess we can depend on the Intrepid, it means we know that ten of the cruiser class Starships will either give support to the revolution or remain neutral."

The cabin intercom buzzed; the two men glanced at each other and Sarek flicked it on. Uhura's face appeared on the screen. "Ambassador, is the Captain with you?"

"Here, Lieutenant."

"Message from Earth, Captain. The Emperor has been assassinated."

Kirk stiffened. "We'll never have a better chance!" he exclaimed. "Helm - one hundred and eighty degrees about! We're going back to Earth!"

"Aye, sir." Kirk did not recognise the voice; with Chekov gone, the junior navigators were rotating, as he was still unsure who would replace the Russian as Chief Navigator.

"Uhura - contact Captains Wesley, Decker, Merrick, Garrett, April and Terrell. Also Achmet, Noguchi and Seval on the Intrepid. They'll have been given this information too. Tell them we're heading back to Earth now."

"Aye, sir."

"And contact Admiral Martin at Starfleet and tell him we're on our way back to... er... help settle any unrest there might be."

"Aye, sir."

"Vulcan - I didn't have much chance to discuss anything with Admiral Martin. I assume he knows who, at Starfleet Command, the revolution can depend on?"

"Yes, he knows. Thomas, I would also like to contact Vulcan."

"Of course." Kirk punched the intercom. "Uhura - Ambassador Sarek needs to make contact with Vulcan. Give him all the assistance he needs."

"Aye, sir."

He knew from the tone in Uhura's voice that she understood exactly what she was being asked to do.

The Enterprise swung into orbit around Earth, picked up Martin who, naturally enough, was not willing to risk the new Emperor's safety, and then altered orbit to pass over the Emperor's Palace. By then four other Starships had entered orbit, and a landing party

composed of the massed Security sections of all five starships beamed down into the grounds of the Palace.

The Captains of all five ships accompanied their landing parties; all five agreed that it was time to declare their allegiance with the rebels.

They beamed down into utter confusion. Theoretically, the Palace advisers would have been quick to declare for the Emperor's son, had he been present to assume the throne; but he was not present, and nobody knew where he was.

A completely spontaneous uprising led by some of the servants had taken the advisers completely by surprise, and several of them lay dead before someone managed to alert the Guard - only to discover that nearly a third of the Palace Guard decided to support the rebels.

The Palace Guards who, for whatever reason, remained loyal, assumed, naturally enough, that these Starfleet security guards had been sent to reinforce them in the hours of confusion that followed the discovery of Noonian VII's death. Indeed, the Captain of the Guard greeted them with positive enthusiasm.

"What happened?" Kirk asked him, knowing from Sarek that the Emperor's death, at this time, was premature.

"The Emperor had taken a new concubine," the Captain said.

"Her husband was recently executed as a traitor?" Kirk asked.

"At the formal dinner for the alien diplomats. Yes. She failed to appreciate the honour done her. Somehow she had got hold of a knife, and when the Emperor retired to enjoy his new acquisition, she stabbed him. Unfortunately, she then killed herself as well before she could be punished for her crime."

His hand on his phaser, Kirk looked thoughtfully at the man. "Does it not occur to you that a woman who has just seen her husband rather brutally murdered an hour or two earlier is likely to be unwilling to accept the murderer as a lover that same night?"

"But he was the Emperor!"

"You think what he did was right?"

The Captain suddenly became aware of a hostile note in Kirk's voice, and grabbed for the old-fashioned sword he wore.

Blessing the custom that kept the Palace Guard armed with nothing but such archaic weapons, Kirk fired his phaser, set to heavy stun; the Guard Captain collapsed before he could utter a sound.

"Come on!" Kirk yelled, and the army of security men, led by the five Captains, rushed forward.

In such close quarters it was virtually impossible to use phasers without stunning their own men, but there were plenty of swords and long knives lying beside their previous owners; it was clear that the fighting had already been bloody in the extreme. The leading Starfleet men snatched up these weapons and rushed on.

The noise of fighting guided them into the Palace, to where a small group of men were fighting an obviously losing battle against a much larger force.

The entrance of a large party temporarily stopped hostilities as the

fighters became aware of them.

Kirk threw up a hand to stop his men as he tried to figure out which of the two groups supported the revolution. Then he saw, first, that the smaller party contained a number of men who were obviously servants, and second, the hopeless look that dawned on the face of the man who was, quite clearly, leading that party, as he realised the presence of a large contingent of Starfleet personnel, while grins of satisfaction spread over the faces of several of the men in the larger group.

Kirk stood tall, and shouted, "Up the revolution! Down with Noonian VIII!"

From behind him came a chorus of "Up the revolution!" and Kirk led his men to join the smaller group.

Some indeterminate time later, after disabling more than one opponent, Kirk found himself facing a highly skilled Palace Guardsman and finding himself outclassed. He defended himself as best he could, but with a growing awareness that his arm was tiring and this opponent was going to give him no quarter; no moment when he could let the sword point drop for an instant while he drew a deep, reviving breath.

In a desperate attempt to unsettle the Guardsman, he spared the breath to gasp, "How can you support the Emperor and the things he's done? Cruel, heartless... "

The Guardsman answered, and to Kirk's chagrin he sounded not even out of breath. "How can *you* betray the Empire that trained you and pays you?"

He forced himself to reply, his speech broken. "You think the Emperor has the right to do anything he wants? What if it was your brother he had tortured to death just because he wanted the man's wife?"

"The man was a traitor!"

"How do you know that? Because the Emperor said so?"

"Whatever the Emperor says is truth."

In the face of a renewed, fierce attack, Kirk saved his breath and parried desperately. He managed to deflect the sword point that thrust for his heart, but felt it slash across his ribs. For a moment, the injury was numb, then pain stabbed, preventing him from parrying the next thrust. His arm slashed open to the bone, he staggered back, dropping his sword, and fell. His opponent raised his sword in momentary salute to an adversary he had found worthy, then turned, ready to plunge into the melee once more - and then fell, unconscious, not knowing what had hit him.

Farrell, who had been unable to find a sword but had been picking off Palace Guards with his phaser as he saw opportunities to do so, ignored his latest victim and ran forward to his fallen Captain. He took one look at the blood, and flicked open his communicator.

"Enterprise - two to beam up! Medical emergency! The Captain's hurt!"

Thirty seconds after they materialised, McCoy shot into the transporter room. He took one look at Kirk, muttered, "Damn!" and rushed into action, applying a tourniquet to the arm where a severed artery was spouting blood.

Two orderlies rushed in with a gurney, a bare minute behind McCoy. They lifted Kirk onto it - McCoy snarling, "Careful, you fools!" - and rushed out again. Farrell followed, but nearly bumped into Martin, who was passing along the corridor.

Martin looked at Farrell. "What happened?"

Discipline won over Farrell's instinct to go with Kirk. "They're fighting with swords down there, sir," he replied. "It's hard to use a phaser - too much chance of hitting one of our own side - though some of us were managing to pick off some. Stun only - we had our orders."

Martin nodded. "And Captain Kirk?"

"He met up with a damn good swordsman. Gave him a run for his money, too, but it was the difference between someone who uses a sword all the time and someone who just fences occasionally for the exercise."

"You're his senior operative?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll still be needed for a while, but with luck we'll see a lot of changes in the Empire in the next few years."

"I hope so, sir."

"You won't be needed in sickbay, you know." Martin correctly interpreted the look on Farrell's face. "Dr McCoy is committed to the new order. If it's possible to save Captain Kirk, he will."

"I know, sir, but I still want to be there." He hesitated. "Jim - Captain Kirk - is my foster brother, sir."

"Dismissed, then. And don't worry." But Martin knew, as he watched Kirk's senior operative go, that the man would worry until Kirk was on his feet again.

By the time Martin beamed down, the fighting was over. The last few of the Emperor's Guard who were uninjured - or who were merely phaser stunned - were under strict guard. Captain Wesley, who had taken over when Kirk fell, had summoned doctors to see to the wounded, and by doing so had obtained a lot of new recruits for the revolution, for the defeated knew that if they had won, the injured enemy would either have been killed on the spot or imprisoned to suffer, and die or recover as their strength dictated, without any medical care.

The Emperor's advisers were all under arrest - indeed, the only person missing was the heir, and nobody knew where he had gone - or if they knew, they were not saying anything. Until he was found, however, he would be a focus for people with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and everyone who sympathised with the revolution was instructed to watch out for him.

Meanwhile, news of the coup had been sent to Vulcan and to all the worlds that had been ripe for rebellion. Several planetary governors met a quick end at the hands of their underlings; others met a not-so-quick end at the hands of the people they had victimised. There was no doubt that the new Emperor had the immediate support of the Empire even before his name was known.

The new Emperor turned out to be an Empress - Robin, who had herself been kept in ignorance of the position planned

for her as a distant Singh relative. Her first decision, made as soon as she realised the power she now held, was to order the release of all political prisoners; her second offered amnesty to all leading politicians apart from a few who were known as sadistic supporters of Noonian's worst excesses, provided they accepted that a new order was being instituted. She had the wisdom to realise that things could not be changed overnight without causing possibly greater suffering to many than they already knew; only the worst inequalities could be removed immediately. Tax levels would have to remain high for some time, but could gradually be lowered as the worst money-wasting departments were identified and made more efficient; meanwhile, several planets whose taxation levels were impossibly high had their taxes reduced by an immediate ten percent. Sarek and Martin, chosen as her senior advisers, nodded to each other in quiet satisfaction, aware that they had chosen the Empire's new ruler well.

For some weeks after the successful coup small pockets of resistance to the new order were still being found, but only where a greedy and shortsighted overseer or minor politician refused to accept that his power was over. Most had the intelligence to realise that their days of careless luxury were past; many, knowing themseves well hated, quietly gathered together their wealth and disappeared into obscurity. And still the whereabouts of the Noonian heir remained a mystery.

The man who staggered into the elite Beijing hospital wore the rags of clothing that had once, clearly, been the height of recent fashion. He was filthy, ungroomed, his beard untrimmed, and - as the hastily-summoned duty Doctor immediately realised - he was in the grip of extreme withdrawal from whatever drugs he had been addicted to.

He was, Dr Kwan decided, a rich addict whose supplies had run out and who had come seeking more - he had seen many of these in the eight years he had spent in Beijing - to the point where he had sometimes wondered why he had ever become a doctor. The people who really needed medical care could not afford it, the ones who could afford it only misused it to feed their vices.

Well, things were changed now. This one would not be able to buy more drugs - if indeed he could summon up the control to tell them which drug he wanted! Kwan had never seen anyone in such a state of withdrawal. He wondered why the man had not come in earlier, then decided that he had probably realised that the hospitals were no longer permitted to sell drugs - or perhaps he *had* come in earlier, when some other doctor was on call, and been turned away. All addicts coming into hospital were being offered treatment, though not all accepted it; perhaps this man was one of the ones who had gone away, hoping to be able to find another source of the drugs his system craved, and he had come back now on discovering that there was no other source. The Empire had been ruthless in exterminating all free-lance drug dealers; the sale of drugs through hospitals had been an excellent source of income for the Emperor. The Empress however, was as ruthless in suppressing the sale of addictive drugs as her distant relative Noonian had been in encouraging it; Kwan knew that any doctor who did supply any of these drugs would find himself out of work in very short order. Or no; not out of work - rather, he would lose his prestigious position and be assigned to work in the

slums. The Empress had a surprisingly compassionate attitude towards the unfortunate poor. In principle, Kwan agreed with it; he did not, however, want to find himself assigned to work in the poorer areas of Beijing.

He therefore summoned a nurse and gave instructions that the addict be taken to a locked ward and given an all-purpose drug replacement, in the hope of jolting the man back to some semblence of control. Kwan could then question the man, learn what drugs he had been taking, and prescribe the proper medication.

An hour later, the nurse reported back to him. There was no improvement in the victim's condition; if anything, he was worse.

"Worse?" Kwan repeated blankly.

Nurse Li nodded. "Yes, Doctor. The replacement has had no effect at all."

Kwan frowned, thinking furiously. No effect? The replacement that was used was effective for ninety-five percent of all known drugs. The remaining five percent...

This man, then, was - or had been - rich enough, foolish enough, to take one of the five percent of drugs for which there was no known way of easing withdrawal. If he survived the agony of withdrawal, his heart would probably be permanently affected - if it was not permanently affected already from his indulgence in the stuff. It told Kwan, as well, that his patient was not a local man; Beijing Hospital had carried many different drugs - knowing it was an important money-earner for the Emperor the senior Doctor had not been foolish enough to refuse to sell any drugs, although he was fanatically anti-drug, for some reason Kwan had never been able to discover - but he had flatly refused to stock any of that lethal five percent.

"Doctor," Li added, "I think you had better come and see the man. The way he's talking... I think he may already be insane."

At some point during the past hour, Li had had to fasten the patient with security straps. He was fighting the restraints, screaming threats and calling for guards to come and arrest the people who had dared do this to him; and then apparently forgetting where he was, calling for someone called Joachim to 'bring my tonic'. Kwan stood listening to the man's almost incoherent raving for some minutes before a horrible suspicion began to dawn.

"Nurse," he said. "I don't think this man has taken drugs at all. I think he's been given them without his knowledge. Go and ask Dr Xu if he would please come and see this patient. Tell him it's very important; I would like his confirmation of my suspicions."

"Yes, Doctor."

Li hurried off, and Kwan continued to listen to the muddled orders the sick man continued to give to people who existed only in his tortured mind; and the more he heard, the more convinced he was that his suspicions were correct.

It was about quarter of an hour before Dr Xu arrived, Nurse Li hurrying behind him.

"Well, Doctor?" Xu snapped. "This had better be important."

"Thank you for coming, sir." Kwan indicted the raving patient. "Doctor, I think that this man was drugged without

his knowledge; in his delirium he speaks of needing his 'tonic'. I've never heard an addict call any drug a 'tonic' - he usually asks for it by name."

"True, true, but that's no reason to interrupt me. You know how busy I am with all the changes the new administration is imposing - "

"Yes, sir. That's only part of why I sent for you. Doctor, I think this man is the missing Noonian VIII."

The reappearance of the missing Noonian heir put the last pieces to the puzzle that Admiral Martin was compiling. Kwan, it appeared, was right; when he finally recovered from the agonies of withdrawal, Noonian VIII confirmed that he had not knowingly taken any drugs; what he had taken was a 'tonic' prescribed by his family's doctor to counteract a tendency to asthma he had suffered as a child. Presented with this piece of knowledge on the part of his captors, the Emperor's doctor admitted that the hereditary advisers had been systematically drugging the Emperors ever since the days of Noonian III. He himself, although not an adviser, had been extremely well paid for his treachery to his masters.

Noonian VIII, his health permamently impaired, was glad to retire to the relative obscurity of a minor palace. He was - as far as anyone could tell - genuinely horrified by the tales of the excesses in which he had taken part, excesses he claimed to have no memory of, and when, some months later, word reached him of a plot to assassinate the Empress in order to replace him on the throne he flatly refused to have any part of it and indeed betrayed the plot to the authorities. Robin visited him occasionally; they found they had more in common than Robin would ever have credited in the days before the revolution, and Noonian several times gave her good advice. He never became one of her official advisers, but Sarek and Martin fully agreed that as an unofficial adviser he was very good, well worth the allowance he was, as her relative, given. The House of Noonian was not, as Sarek had told Kirk, rotten; the Emperors' only fault had been to trust too blindly to the honesty of their advisers, but it had caused over a hundred years of misery for the Empire.

Captain James Kirk returned to the Enterprise with a couple of scars he chose not to have removed and a vast feeling of relief. His friendship with Farrell continued unabated, but Farrell, as Security Chief, could now live his own life. A new relationship had developed between the Captain and his First Officer; the incipient trust that had always been there had developed over the days of the revolution, and Kirk felt that this new partnership would be as unbeatable in the new Empire as it had been in the old.

He sat back in his command chair and studied his orders.

"Explore the galaxy. Seek out new life forms and new civilisations; we have been hated for too long. It is time to make new friends."